

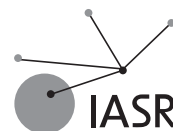


International Area Studies Review

2026, Vol. 29(2) 93–112

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<https://doi.org/10.69473/iasr.2026.29.2.93>



Article

Rhizomatic Elites: Rethinking Power, Multiplicity, and Spatial Networks in Urban Indonesia

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Abstract

This study reconceptualizes elite formation and power in urban Indonesia through a poststructuralist lens, critiquing hierarchical models from Western contexts. We develop Rhizomatic Network Analysis (RNA)—a methodology grounded in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy—to examine elite dynamics in Makassar. Moving beyond conventional approaches, we theorize elites as molecular assemblages—contingent formations shaped by affective, discursive, and material relationships. Our data reveals that power operates through horizontal networks rather than centralized structures. Through empirical cases, we demonstrate how elites territorialize and reterritorialize space according to shifting alliances and contexts. These findings challenge conventional elite theory by revealing three characteristics of rhizomatic power: fluidity of elite status as contingent formations, multiplicity of overlapping relational dimensions, and spatiality of power across formal and informal domains. This approach offers insights into elite formation in the Global South and contributes to debates in political sociology, urban studies, and critical geography by showing how Southern urban contexts can reinterpret global social theory.

Keywords

Elite, Rhizomatic network, Fluidity, Multiplicity, Spatiality, Global South, Urban Indonesia

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Introduction

In global urban environments defined by complexity and diversity, a critical paradox emerges: while Global South cities most vigorously challenge conventional Western concepts (Chattopadhyay, 2012; Watson, 2009), they remain underrepresented in urban political research (Robinson, 2006; Roy, 2011). This disparity reveals research opportunities but also exposes an epistemological crisis: Western-dominated urban methodologies must be re-contextualized rather than universally applied to account for the social, material, cultural, political, and historical specificities of Southern cities (Sheppard et al., 2013). The position of these cities does not merely present a literature gap; it fundamentally questions Western urban theory's hegemony and compels examination--one that moves beyond applying Western thought to its contextualization--into "the context and practices that shaped southern cities, as well as the position of all the theories produced" (Lawhon & Truelove, 2020, p. 14).

This study addresses the following research question: How do elites form, maintain, and exercise power in the fluid, decentralized, and spatially embedded contexts of urban Indonesia, particularly in Makassar? Instead, it operates through intersecting informal networks, where the lines between political, business, social, and even marginal spaces are significantly blurred (Moatasim, 2018; Yakub et al., 2022). The ever-evolving personal relationships, patronage systems, and alliances frequently wield more influence than formal structural positions or assumptions about the historical impact of colonialism (see, e.g., Aspinall & Hicken, 2020; Nordholt, 2011; van Klinken & Nordholt, 2007). This reality, characterized by fluidity, fragmentation, and heterogeneity, poses a fundamental challenge to traditional elite theories, which often conceptualize elites as cohesive and stable groups at the top of the social hierarchy (Wedel, 2017).

This empirical reality in Southeast Asian cities shows the inadequacy of classical theoretical frameworks for understanding elite power in the urban Global South. While conventional theory describes hierarchical structures, cities like Makassar show that elite actors emerge from traditional institutions and fluid domains like religious organizations, youth movements, informal business networks, and activist communities. Elite status is fluid and contextual, shaped by networks, cultural capital, and spatial affiliations rather than formal rank (Yakub et al., 2022). Although elite theories acknowledge this diversity, their approaches remain structural and reductionist, failing to capture the relational dynamics, negotiations, and roles of shifting alliances that characterize elite formation in Global South cities.

Recent advancements in urban elite studies have transitioned from structural to relational approaches, emphasizing power dynamics among elites, non-elites, and their networks. These approaches have been crucial in mapping elite configurations, assessing network positions (Knoke & Yang, 2008), visualizing influence patterns (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), and analyzing elite relationships (Domhoff, 2018; Sklair, 2001). However, critics argue that these models remain overly structural, reducing social dynamics to static position data while overlooking discourse, temporality, and spatiality (Allen, 2003; Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Fairclough, 1995; Leitner et al., 2008; White, 1992). The focus on centrality within a limited elite circle obscures the diversity and decentralized nature of power in our interconnected society.

Recent scholarly discussions have transcended binary frameworks of elite power, acknowledging elite influence across cultural, social, and knowledge capital domains (Higley, 2009; Higley & Moore, 2001). Political scientists highlight the fluidity of elites in evolving contexts (Bian 2002; Song et al., 2019). Critical traditions delve into elite reproduction within historical structures, symbolic capital, and institutional ideologies (Bourdieu, 1996). While these approaches have deepened the understanding of elite persistence, they often uphold

deterministic views of social structures. Discursive and poststructuralists, as Laclau and Mouffe (2014) propose, advocate for a non-essentialist perspective on elite identity. However, this shift toward discourse has faced criticism for overlooking how elite power is entrenched in practices, institutional arrangements, and territorial processes (Buchanan, 2015; Patton, 2006; Smith, 1985).

This study contends that Makassar presents a unique “living laboratory” for testing Deleuzian concepts from a Southeast Asian perspective. In a setting where power is fluid, concepts like “rhizomes” (a network without a center), “assemblage” (a heterogeneous collection of elements), and “de-territorialization” (losing position or influence) become tangible. Through empirical narratives of Makassar elites, we demonstrate how a politician’s downfall exemplifies “absolute de-territorialization,” how relationships between political rivals serve as survival strategy, and how youth groups form assemblages to create new power spaces. The Rhizomatic Network Analysis (RNA) approach reconceptualizes elite formation in Indonesia while showing how Global South insights can enrich global critical theory.

In exploring this question, we provide deep empirical insights into the configuration of local power in Indonesia, underscoring the broader significance of these findings for analyzing elite dynamics in other urban settings across the Global South. Here, complexity, fragmentation, and fluidity increasingly define social and political life. We then detail our methodological approach, Rhizomatic Network Analysis (RNA), and present our empirical findings from Makassar, tracing the emergence, multiplicity, and spatial strategies of these elite groups. Finally, we conclude with a discussion on the implications of our rhizomatic model for rethinking power and elite theory in the Global South.

Rethinking Elite Within a Deleuzian Framework: Fluidity, Multiplicity, and Spatiality

Beyond assemblage (see e.g., Atkinson, 2024; Buchanan, 2015; Delanda, 2016), their work offers ideas—including rhizomatics, territorialization, and the nomad—that challenge essentialist models. Rhizomatic logic, positing non-hierarchical networks as alternatives to arborescent structures, reframes how scholars analyze social movements. This appears in Dovey’s (2012) work on informal settlements, arguing these spaces “are not simply unplanned but are rhizomatic: self-organized and adaptive, with multiple connections.” Territorialization and deterritorialization provide a tool for understanding urban transformation, from institutional power to digital space. This connects to the nomad and smooth/striated space, analyzing conflicts between state-controlled “striated” space and emergent “smooth” spaces of informal practices.

The assemblage theory, as articulated by Fariás and Bender (2010), facilitates the examination of a city as a contingent assembly of diverse elements. Additionally, the logic of the rhizome has been utilized to comprehend the diffuse, network-based nature of global city formations and activist movements, while analyses of deterritorialization elucidate the influence of global capital in reshaping the urban landscape.

This relational ontology challenges traditional elite studies frameworks that rely on a rigid elite/non-elite dichotomy (Mutch et al., 2006; Ozanne et al., 2017). From a Deleuzian perspective, such a binary is “striation,” failing to capture power’s fluid nature. Elites can be seen as a dynamic assemblage—a contingent gathering of capital, social connections, institutional positions, and discourses undergoing territorialization (stabilization) and deterritorialization (dissolution). The rhizomatic nature of elite networks, with diffuse, cross-sectoral, and global connections, complicates identification via institutional affiliations (Woods, 1998). Traditional studies (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993; Putnam, 1976) overlook how elite power is relationally constituted through

interactions with the material, social, and technological fabric of the city. A Deleuzian approach shifts focus from who elites are to how elite formations emerge and exert influence within the urban assemblage.

To address limitations of rigid frameworks in elite studies, this study employs Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical framework from *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) to reconceptualize societal structures. Using their rhizome concept, we theorize a social field of interconnected relationships forming a fluid, decentralized order. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 21) state, "Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions... the rhizome is made only of lines; lines of segmentarity and stratifications as its dimensions, and the line of flight or deterritorialization as the maximum dimension..." This perspective views society as a "body without organs" (BwO)—where social formations temporarily coalesce through relationships establishing provisional order, creating unstable "strata" shaped by social interactions. Society cannot be captured by a singular model but must be understood through deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes.

Drawing on the Deleuzo-Guattarian approach, this study crafted three fundamental concepts—fluidity, multiplicity, and spatiality—to enable empirical analysis through this dynamic ontology, positioning them as the main analytical lens.

Elite Fluidity and Contingencies of Social Formations

Within the rhizomatic framework, society is conceptualized as decentralized, evolving through social practices termed fluidity (Bevir, 1999; Gehman et al., 2021; Patton, 2006). This paradigm alters our perception of elite status. Instead of viewing elites as fixed categories atop a hierarchy, they emerge from relational, affective, discursive, and material connections within an assemblage (Dovey, 2012; Fariás, 2011). The elite is a molecular assemblage—a temporary configuration of elements, including institutions, symbols, affects, and infrastructure (Redhead & Power, 2022; Savage, 2019). The rhizomatic perspective views the elite through network connections (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). An elite is a composite of elements forming a temporary assemblage.

"Articulation lines," as used by Deleuze and Guattari (1987, p. 90), show how structure, identity, and order form in society. Articulation connects elements into identifiable shapes that can be controlled, resonating with Foucault's (1986) analysis of spatial organization (Elden & Crampton, 2012; Mckinlay et al., 2012; Power, 2011). It represents segmentarity, where elements form structures to facilitate interactions. The elite can be conceptualized as individuals who expand influence to build order, similar to Laclau's (2006a) "articulation of nodal points" of power (See also Laclau & Mouffe, 2014). Elites build networks by mobilizing relationships and negotiating with other units. Their authority stems from discursive actions creating order and occupying social positions by disciplining subjects (Dijk, 2013; Thurlow & Jaworski, 2017).

Within this framework, elites constitute a fundamental component across societal subsystems. Their mobility interconnects these sub-systems, facilitating integration and enhancing status through expansion, a dynamic noted in studies of transnational capitalist classes (Carroll, 2010). The elite network encompasses all societal elements, transcending individual classes. Recruitment and circulation within the elite can originate from diverse social backgrounds, adapting to network relationships (Khan, 2012). The elite's position derives from discourse, influence, and material resources within a group undergoing processes of territorialization (position stabilization) and deterritorialization (position shifting) (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This suggests that the elite's position may shift due to relative deterritorialization or vanish due to absolute deterritorialization.

As an emerging phenomenon, the position and role of elites are subject to discontinuity. Elite

individuals or networks may establish connections with elites or non-elites at specific times and locations; however, these relationships may dissolve, prompting elites to transition to different networks. Temporality in space and time exists because elite power can only be exercised within certain spatial and temporal contexts. Shifts in space or time create opportunities that necessitate renegotiating social relationships (Massey, 2005).

In Makassar, this analytical approach shifts from statically identifying “who is the elite?” to investigating “how is elite status assembled and maintained?”. The primary focus is the process of elite formation, aligning with studying “elite formation as a process.” Elite status remains contingent and subject to change. An event—such as shifts in public sentiment, new actors, or changes in political alliances—can trigger a “line of flight,” causing the disappearance of a strong elite position (absolute de-territorialization) or a significant status shift (relative de-territorialization). This fluidity enables analysis of elite power’s rise and decline as an open process, particularly relevant in Southeast Asia’s dynamic political landscape (Törnquist, 2013b).

Multiplicity and Elite Power

Multiplicity is a pivotal concept in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy that challenges conventional understandings of identity and power. Deleuzian multiplicity posits that entities are constituted by interconnected elements in constant states of interaction and becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Linstead & Thanem, 2007). As Nail (2017) emphasizes, “a multiplicity is defined not by its essential characteristics but by its lines of movement and transformation.” Community and power formations are understood as rhizomatic processes, developing through connections without a predetermined center (Chia, 1999; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005).

This multiplicity logic deconstructs elite power by moving away from viewing elites as a coherent class or fixed location in social hierarchy. Instead, an elite individual or group is approached as a complex multiplicity—a constellation of relationships, institutional affiliations, discursive positions, and affective investments (Buchanan, 2021). Power functions through this assemblage’s capacity to connect across social segments, from the “molecular” level of informal friendships to the “molar” level of state and political parties (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Elites leverage their diversity to build networks, articulate social demands into a unified agenda, and “striate” the social space to consolidate influence (Kølvraa, 2017, pp. 96-108).

In urban Makassar, this framework shifts from static powerful individuals to analyzing multi-layered networks constituting elite power. A relationship between a business magnate and bureaucrat encompasses kinship obligations, ethnic identities, political alliances, and economic transactions. This multi-layered nature explains elite networks’ resilience in Makassar; conflicts in one sphere may not damage relationships sustained by other interests. This study investigates how Makassar elites connect these layers—social, economic, political, and cultural—to build influence across domains. It examines elite and non-elite interactions across these dimensions, creating dynamics of patronage and resource allocation that shape the city’s socio-political landscape (Törnquist, 2013a; van Klinken & Berenschot, 2014). The elite/non-elite boundary remains fluid, determined by positions within a constantly negotiated space.

The Spatiality and Reach of Elite Power

The Deleuzo-Guattarian framework fundamentally reconceptualizes space not as a passive, pre-existing container but as a dynamic and relational product of social interactions, power struggles, and affective forces (Dikeç, 2012; Löw, 2016). From this perspective, elite power is inherently spatial; it is not wielded in a vacuum but is produced, contested, and constrained within and

through specific spatial configurations. Each social space—from a formal government office to an informal coffee shop gathering—operates according to its own unique “regime of practices” (Foucault, 1984) and logic. Therefore, the elite’s capacity to master, navigate, and interconnect these heterogeneous spaces is central to their influence on the political landscape. This spatial understanding moves beyond analyzing simple networks to investigate the production of relational spaces where discourse, affect, and material resources are mobilized to create and maintain social segments.

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) provide two crucial conceptual tools for spatial analysis.

- **Striated vs. Smooth Space:** Striated space is organized, hierarchical, and coded, such as in a government bureaucracy, corporate boardroom, or a political party structure. In contrast, smooth space is open, fluid, and unregulated, exemplified by transient social networks, digital forums, and the informal economy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 474-500).
- **Molar vs. Molecular Segmentarity:** This distinguishes the scale of these spaces. Molar segments are rigid, large-scale formations, such as the state or institutionalized religion, while molecular segments are small-scale, fluid arrangements of personal relationships, family ties, and local affinities (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 208-231).

The power of elites in Makassar can be analyzed as a form of strategic “nomadism”—the practiced skill of moving across and translating influence between different spatial registers (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012). A powerful elite figure is not merely one who holds a high molar position (e.g., as a city councilor), but one who can transfer trust, information, and alliances from the smooth, molecular spaces of family gatherings, motorcycle clubs, or troubled youth groups into tangible authority within the striated, molar spaces of the mayor’s office or city parliament. The object of study shifts from mapping fixed elite hierarchies to tracing how Makassar elites assemble a “spatial assemblage of power”—a personalized network linking informal coffee shops with formal meeting rooms of City Hall. The reach of an elite is determined by their ability to accumulate, connect, and commandeer these diverse power spaces into a coherent structure of influence.

Method

In this study, Rhizomatic Network Analysis (RNA) is employed to explore how elites form networks and wield influence within dynamic power structures. Rooted in Deleuze and Guattari’s frameworks, RNA reimagines social relations as non-hierarchical, multidirectional and diverse. A rhizome network comprises elements that connect through dynamic interactions, guided by principles of rupture, heterogeneity, multiplicity, connectivity, cartography and decalomania (Charret and Chankseliani, 2022). The analysis examines interaction patterns and strategies elites use to navigate power within social spaces. Using Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizome concept, this study views networks as intersecting connections where power generates through expansion rather than hierarchy.

RNA distinguishes itself from traditional Western social network analysis (SNA) through three key differences: (1) it dismisses the notion of static nodes and hierarchical frameworks, emphasizing instead dynamic and evolving connections; (2) it includes affective, discursive, and spatial aspects in addition to relational data; and (3) it views power as dispersed and conditional rather than concentrated. Whereas SNA charts fixed positions, RNA follows the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

This study uses qualitative methodologies to investigate elite dynamics not captured by quantitative measures, as elites function as fluid, context-specific entities. Makassar, Indonesia, was selected as the research site for examining rhizomatic elite formations. Here, elites emerge from diverse institutions including religious organizations, youth movements, business networks, activist communities, and informal spaces like mosques. This study provides a framework for understanding decentralized power dynamics often overlooked by institutional or class-based elite analyses.

Field research was conducted in Makassar City from February 2023 to January 2024. Qualitative data were used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the actors, interactions, and practices that constitute elite assemblages. A total of 25 key informants participated in this study, selected through a combination of snowball sampling and purposive sampling. Initial contacts were identified through public records (e.g., former mayors, party leaders) and media reports. Subsequent participants were nominated by initial informants, ensuring access to otherwise hidden elite networks. The informants includes:

- Political elites: Ilham Arief Sirajuddin (IAS, former mayor), and three current/former legislative members.
- Activists and community leaders: Mulyadi Prayitno (PMII), Faisal Sahabuddin (Batalyon 120), and three other civil society figures.
- Youth organization members: Leaders of AMPI, KNPI, and HMI.
- Business and bureaucratic elites: Two senior bureaucrats and two banker.
- HDCI members: Including one anonymous member cited in this study.
- Journalist and academic: two national media journalist, two local media journalist and two academic.

This study employs unstructured interviews with key informants, including political elites (IAS), activists (Mulyadi Prayitno), community leaders, and representatives of youth organizations such as Faisal Sahabuddin of Batalyon 120, to examine the nonlinear and relational aspects of elite politics. The interviews aim to investigate how elites manage the segmentarity between molar structures, such as political parties and bureaucracies, and molecular affiliations, including friendships, hobbies, and family ties. In addition to the interviews, participant observation facilitated a direct analysis of elite interactions in everyday social contexts, such as informal gatherings at coffee shops and activities of hobby organizations like HDCI. Document analysis further enriched the study by examining official records, media reports, and organizational documents, providing factual evidence and discursive context for elite positions and significant events, notably the corruption case involving PDAM experienced by IAS, which initiated a process of deterritorialization.

Our data analysis followed a five-step rhizomatic mapping procedure: (1) Elite Trajectory Tracking – we constructed narrative timelines of each informant’s career, identifying key moments of status change; (2) Articulation Line Mapping – we coded interview transcripts for segments where informants described forming or severing relationships with other actors; (3) Multiplicity Coding – we identified all distinct relational dimensions (e.g., kinship, political alliance, hobby group, business partnership) linking any two actors; (4) Spatiality Analysis – we geocoded and categorized all spaces mentioned by informants (e.g., formal offices, coffee shops, hobby clubs) to map territorialization; (5) Fluidity Assessment – we compared informants’ narratives before and after critical events (e.g., corruption cases, elections) to trace deterritorialization. To ensure the validity and reliability of our findings on Makassar’s rhizomatic elite, we employed a rigorous, multi-strategic approach.

Data and methodological triangulation were used to cross-verify elusive decentralized networks using interviews, observations, and documents. We provide a thick description of the local context to allow for transferability and maintain reflexive journals to document positionality and ethical decisions throughout the sensitive research process.

This research adhered to strict ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to the political implications of studying elite networks.

Empirical Analysis: Rhizomatic Elites in Makassar

Having established Rhizomatic Network Analysis (RNA) as our methodological framework, we now apply its principles to map the dynamic and decentralized power structures of Makassar. The following empirical analysis operationalizes RNA by tracing the concrete manifestations of fluidity, multiplicity, and spatiality within elite networks. Rather than presenting a static list of powerful individuals, we use this lens to illuminate the processes of elite formation and dissolution, deconstruct the multilayered nature of their relationships, and chart the spatial territories they navigate and connect to.

Makassar is a major port city in eastern Indonesia, spanning 175.77 km² with 1.56 million residents (BPS, 2023). An important node in regional trade since the fifteenth century, the city has been shaped by flows of people, goods, and political influence (Andaya, 1981; Hadiz, 2010; Pelras, 1996; van Klinken & Berenschot, 2014). Its contemporary political landscape reflects this history, marked by fragmented authority, informal networks, and overlapping domains spanning politics, business, religion, youth activism, and civic associations. Elite power rarely crystallizes around a single hierarchical structure, instead circulating through relational circuits that connect formal institutions with informal social spaces, and local communities with broader political networks. Through RNA analysis, Makassar's elite landscape appears as a rhizomatic configuration of multiple connections—professional, associational, familial, cultural, and religious—continually reassembled in response to shifting conditions. This setting demands an analytical shift from identifying fixed elite groups toward tracing how elite status is produced, contested, and reconfigured.

Our empirical investigation in Makassar reveals a landscape of power that defies the conventional hierarchical models. The elite formations we observed were not static entities but were dynamic, fluid, and multi-layered assemblages. This section presents our findings through the triple lens of our theoretical framework: first, by tracing the fluidity of elite emergence and decline; second, by deconstructing the multiplicity that constitutes elite relationships; and third, by mapping the spatiality of their power across the formal and informal domains.

The Fluidity of Elite Formation and Dissolution

The Emergence of the Elites

Research in Makassar shows elite emergence as a dynamic process of “becoming” rather than a fixed state. The boundaries of elite status remain fluid, enabling social mobility and creating a heterogeneous political landscape. This phenomenon is characterized by elites maintaining positions through strategic alliances, adaptive abilities, and power negotiations. There is no single pattern of emergence; Makassar's elite transformation is driven by evolving relationships and can be interpreted through the Deleuzian lens of territorialization and deterritorialization, where status is continually created, destroyed, and recreated. To map this fluidity, the analysis traces the predominant processes—the lines of flight and moments of rupture—through which elite

assemblages form, stabilize, and transform.

Mulyadi attained elite status within PMII through collective assemblage, facilitating knowledge generation and subjectivity construction. Initially, he employed segmentation to cultivate his identity as elite accountants. His emergence transcended hierarchical space through connections enabling engagement with other elites. While his movement in smooth spaces causes deterritorialization of elite status, the absence of hierarchy enhances adaptability. During the interview, Mulyadi described using PMII elite relationships to access elite circles in larger organizations: role expansion intensifies deterritorialization, affecting elite status in PMII. These networks maintain elite status, as alliances enable power consolidation between spaces where the individual is recognized as elite.

“When I became the chairman of PMII South Sulawesi, I met many other PMII chairmen from all over Indonesia. From there, my relationships continued to grow, and I gained many connections with other organizations, including WALHI, LBH, and others.” (Mulyadi Prayitno, 2023).

Mulyadi Prayitno shows multiplicities emerges when elites operate in inclusive spaces unbound by hierarchy, allowing equal interaction with others and power dynamics. Positioning in each space involves discourse that is influenced by elite capacity and attributes. Mulyadi attributes his chairmanship of institutions to support his movements and network reputation. His identity as an activist with networks throughout Indonesia and elite connections afforded him privileges in relational spaces. This identity enables recognition by other elites, allowing relationship-building. Elite reputation grows with relationship development, as reflected in connected spaces. The attributes of cross-space elite relationships contribute to recognition, developmental influence, and factors in forming network relationships.

Elites emerge through assemblages and collective discourse on political issues. Batalyon 120 represents youth aspirations that align with political elites, bureaucrats, and community leaders. As Makassar’s largest youth community, Batalyon 120 includes ex-convicts, street criminals, and individuals facing social issues, with 4,000 members. In building this network, Faisal, Batalyon 120’s leader, formed alliances with elites like the Makassar Police Chief, Mayor, and community leaders to facilitate member activities. Faisal Sahabuddin maintains that through assemblage, Batalyon 120 disciplines individuals, guides members to beneficial activities, and reduces crime rates in Makassar. This shows that dominance is not essential to elite formation power dynamics. The ability of elites to shape collective aspirations influences their community standing. Elites achieve authority through differentiation and trust within the group, rather than solely through power allocation. These findings contrast with the view that elites gain authority only through privileged positions.

The effort to achieve elite status, as shown by Faisal Shabuddin in the Batalyon 120, demonstrates an attempt to build territorial claims by harnessing political dynamics to create space and embed discourses that shape the collective identity. ‘Space’ transcends the physical dimension to represent forums for interaction, creating external and internal boundaries, such as group identity or social harmony. Elites emerging from territorial claims benefit from controlling discourse and networks, influencing subject formation in these relationships.

In another example, elite emergence began with individuals capturing the established elites’ power through patronage or by serving as proxies. A key informant, Ilham Arief Sirajuddin (IAS), the former mayor of Makassar from 2003 to 2013, exemplifies this trajectory. He stated that his political career began when Nurdin Halid (NH), an influential Golkar Party politician in Makassar during the 1990s, recruited him, while IAS was a student active in the FKKPI youth organization. Through this association, IAS leveraged NH’s influence to secure patronage access, enabling

him to build networks and gain positions in youth organizations, such as AMPI and KNPI. Over time, IAS expanded influence by creating his own relational network through various strategies, including establishing patronage networks using available resources, capitalizing on his elite reputation, and forging alliances with influential people. This case illustrates that elite emergence shifts constantly, not bound by fixed patterns but shaped by relational context and individual capacity to navigate it.

In scholarly works, elites often emerge from networks of patronage with clientelistic relationships, where resource mobilization and policy access play crucial roles (Aspinall, 2013; Hadiz, 2010; Mieznar, 2009). However, this study reveals this pattern is not predominant in the rise of elite classes. Elite positions and status are attained through interactions with social elements that vary across contexts. IAS highlights that an elite's position depends on relational characteristics within a given context. Sometimes, an elite acts as a proxy for others or emerges through factors like proxy roles, elite patronage, and mayoral status. When elites form relationships and establish articulation lines to create formations or groups, they do not operate in isolation. Instead, they navigate social spaces marked by diverse attributes, interests, and discourses. The presence of masses in these social spaces does not hinder the elite's ability to form or integrate with other social spaces, enhancing their diversity.

“Usually, they engage because they have the same anxiety and longing to be accepted and integrated into society. Indeed, getting a job is often a challenge, and they often face rejection in their local environment because of this stigma.” (Sahabuddin, 2023).

This illustrates that the rise of elites is not solely due to their claim to a particular community or social structure; on the contrary, the interests of the elite must also be aligned with the concerns and desires of the masses regarding political issues of mutual importance. Instead, it highlights the fluidity and ever-changing nature of elite positions, which shift with the context and relationship dynamics. For instance, when motorcycle gangs, street kids, and communities become part of Batalyon 120, their leaders transition from being elites to followers, even though they continue to wield influence over their previous power structures within the group.

It dictates the elite-mass relationship in the organization through structured interactions. However, as IAS and Mulyadi noted, external factors, such as friendship and connectivity, can affect member interactions.

Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization Mechanism

The analysis shows that elite evolution continues with multiplicity development, driven by integrating diverse spaces into elite networks through deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The relationships within each space influence how elites emerge, secure positions, and territorialize connected multiplicity. These dynamics determine whether an elite retains or loses status. Elites arise from relationships and contexts allowing subject differentiation, enabling them to represent or discipline connected individuals in an assemblage. Since relations in the assemblage form through temporal political objectives, they remain temporary and contingent. Thus, the subject's position is temporary, undergoing deterritorialization and reterritorialization due to events, sentiment shifts, and new actors forming a new set.

Relationships within assemblages change due to events, new elites, and shifts in emotional responses. These factors can lead to lines of flight, create instability, and initiate deterritorialization. In elites, deterritorialization occurs when relationships are severed, decreasing the influence of the upper elite class. This process can be triggered by changes in feelings, experiences, and knowledge acquired through assemblage interactions. Such changes may stem

from an event's deterritorializing force becoming a line of flight, a challenger elite's rise, or emotional shifts within relationships. These occurrences can lead to elite repositioning or reduced power coverage, either relatively or absolutely.

Mulyadi Prayitno's case shows the interplay of deterritorialization and reterritorialization in elite "becoming." His status as a PMII elite underwent deterritorialization when he moved beyond the organization's structured space into a "smooth space"—the informal realm of relationships with other elites. In this space, his formal title held less sway, destabilizing the previous elite configuration. However, this movement initiated reterritorialization. By navigating this broader social field, Mulyadi forged connections with local elites. These activities enhanced his capacity and resources, contributing to his elite recognition in new areas. His trajectory shows that elite status is not lost but reconfigured; the deterritorialization of his position in one assemblage enables its reterritorialization within another network.

The dynamics of elite status—made and unmade through relational networks—are visible in its unraveling. The case of Ilham Arief Sirajuddin (IAS) shows how a disruptive event can trigger deterritorialization. IAS explained that his arrest by the KPK in the Makassar PDAM corruption case reduced his elite capacity. This case refers to the 2015 corruption investigation involving IAS and the Makassar municipal water utility (PDAM), as reported by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and covered in multiple Indonesian media outlets (see, e.g., Kompas, 2015; Tempo, 2016). This event severed vital connections within his assemblage. His control over resources and influence diminished as the scandal altered perceptions. This rupture created a line of flight—not escape, but of exodus—where allies were deterritorialized. This case caused other elites to distance themselves. This de-territorialization eroded his elite status, showing that "becoming" is reversible and vulnerable to the same forces that constitute it.

"When you are no longer in a position to provide access, and worse, carry the stigma of a corruption case, the phone stops ringing. The same people who once filled your office for meetings now prefer to have 'coffee' without you." (Ilham Arief Sirajuddin, Interview, 2023).

The cases of Mulyadi and IAS show that elite power in Makassar is not fixed, but emerges from continuous deterritorialization and reterritorialization processes. Power is distributed across network nodes, with each entity wielding authority within their sphere. This structure aligns with rhizomatic elite assemblages, where power operates without a dominant hierarchy. Identifying a dominant elite becomes difficult, as relationships are characterized by diversity in ideas, information, and resource flow. The system exhibits resilience: if one relationship is severed, as in IAS's case, the network logic compels elites to seek alternative connections and re-territorialize within the shifting assemblage.

It is not a static pyramid to be climbed, but a living rhizomatic assemblage in flux, reconfiguring itself through deterritorialization and reterritorialization. As the trajectories of Mulyadi Prayitno and Ilham Arief Sirajuddin show, elite status is a convergence of relationships, resources, and recognition, vulnerable to new lines of flight. There is no permanent throne in this network; only continuous strategic negotiation within the "super-hub" of the assemblage. Power resides not in the elite but in the dynamic network they temporarily inhabit. The "elite" is not a fixed class but a contingent process of becoming.

Multiplicity: The Multi-Layered Nature of Elite Relationships

Moving beyond the documentation of fluid trajectories, this analysis contends that the very substance of elite power in Makassar lies in its inherent multiplicity—the complex, overlapping,

and interconnected layers that constitute what might otherwise appear as a single relationship. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "body without organs," we understand these social formations as interconnected targets in continuous processes of territorialization. Therefore, multiplicity enhances elite power by linking diverse individuals and groups into fluid assemblages through shared goals, discourses, and differentiated positions. To ground this theoretical framework, the following analysis traces the networks of key Makassar figures, demonstrating how this multiplicity manifests in practice and shapes the dynamic, context-dependent nature of elite power.

Ilham Arief Sirajuddin (IAS) is a significant figure in Makassar politics with an extensive network connecting him to the city's elites. He served as Mayor of Makassar from 2004-2014, held positions as Chairman of DPD II Makassar Golkar Party, DPD I Golkar South Sulawesi, and DPD Democratic Party of South Sulawesi. IAS is active in organizations including FKPP, REI, HIPMI, HDKI, Inkanas Forki Makassar, Tiger Club, KBPPP, and RAPI in South Sulawesi, Indonesia. He maintains connections with diverse Makassar elites, including politicians, business leaders, bureaucrats, bankers, legal professionals, law enforcement, military personnel, prosecutors, student leaders, community figures, religious authorities, and individuals engaged in illicit activities.

These relationships highlight variations in context, spatial dynamics, and subjectivity. IAS described his long-standing familiarity with SYL, the former governor of South Sulawesi (2008 to 2018) and minister of Indonesian Agriculture (2019-2023), which was established during their adolescence as FKPP administrators and later as AMPI administrators under Nurdin Halid, eventually leading to positions within the Golkar party. During the 2009 Golkar South Sulawesi chairmanship contest, discord arose when they were party cadres in different elite formations; yet, their relationship remained interconnected across various contexts.

"Many people assume that Mr. Syahrul and I are at odds since I left Golkar, but in reality, we still often spend time together, whether it's gathering or having coffee. This is something that people are unaware of. As Mayor, I sometimes seek his advice as governor, and as friends, we also confide in each other." (IAS, 2023).

IAS's description shows that multiplicity with overlapping relationships exists in networks and interactions between elites. Elite connections are not singular; each relationship has its own domain with distinct subjectivities and structures, spanning multiple contexts and times. The relationship between the IAS and SYL constitutes a multiplicity that enables adaptable interactions between these elites, allowing them to harness others' influence and address challenges.

Contrary to conventional network analysis, which describes relationships as a single dimension connecting entities hierarchically, this study reveals that relationships comprise multiple dimensions that interconnect entities across contexts and spaces. When visualized, these relationships generate additional dimensions, forming a network in which no single relationship determines the others.

Incorporating context and space into a relationship enhances its dimensionality, enabling entities to establish multiple connections and forming multiplicity. This aligns with Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome concept in "A Thousand Plateaus" (1987), where nodal points generate new relationships and connection lines become multiplicities. The study showed that increased dimensions between elite entities correlate with heightened fluidity, enhancing transitions between dimensions. In power dynamics, the multiplicity among elite entities enables the integration of power modes, allowing for mutual influence across relational contexts, resulting in

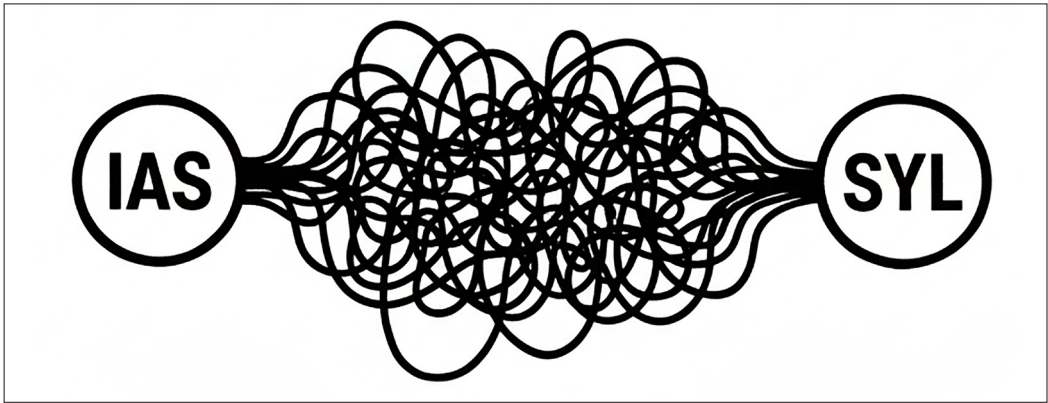


Figure 1. Illustration of multiplicity in the relationship between two subjects (Authors' original conceptual diagram)

Source: Authors' elaboration based on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) rhizome concept.

a more adaptable and effective exercise of power.

In a relational network, multiplicity manifests through connections between subjects. This multiplicity creates diverse dimensions of relations and expands the network itself through increased interactions and the incorporation of new spaces.

Elites actively cultivate this multiplicity by recruiting individuals who can assist them, targeting both established elites and those with potential elite statuses. A key example is Ilham Arief Sirajuddin (IAS), who strategically assembled a network of diverse backgrounds. He recruited bureaucratic elites from youth organizations such as AMPI and KNPI, leveraged friendships from his adolescence and college years, and incorporated student activists. This assembled network spanned political parties and bureaucratic entities under his purview. Utilizing patronage resources, IAS facilitated individuals from these varied backgrounds to occupy strategic positions within governmental and organizational structures, such as the Makassar House of Representatives, thereby further expanding their influence and embedding their network in the broader political landscape.

"While serving as Mayor, I recruited Sugali, Basdir, and Aru from AMPI and KNPI, and facilitated their transition to becoming council members..." (IAS, 2023).

Elites foster multiplicity by enlisting diverse actors to broaden influence across social contexts and reinforce rhizomatic networks. This connection, formed in a social "smooth space," was reterritorialized into the political arena; the banker supported IAS's political agendas, facilitated connections, and provided funding. This case shows how multiplicity functions spatially; relationships formed in one environment become interconnected with others, creating links between social elements. Each space produces knowledge that informs elite behavior and positioning. As elite individuals like IAS navigate these spheres—from hobby communities to formal politics—they engage in territorialization, accumulating space-specific knowledge and negotiating position. The broader this territorialization across spaces, the more extensive the elite's influence becomes, showing how multiplicity involves strategic diversification.

The Harley Davidson Club Indonesia (HDCI) in Makassar serves as a "smooth space" where elite multiplicity is cultivated. For figures like Ilham Arief Sirajuddin (IAS), the club was not

merely a social forum but a platform for deterritorialization, allowing him to shed his political identity and connect with elites from banking, business, military, and bureaucracy. These relationships extend beyond clubs into other domains. The multidimensional networks provide members with fluidity, enabling mobilization in political, business, and social contexts. Thus, the club acts as an incubator where forming connections in smooth spaces and leveraging them in structured territories amplifies elite influence within the city’s rhizomatic network.

“It’s much easier to talk about a difficult issue here than in a formal office.” (HDCI Member; Interview, 2023).

The relationships within the network are rhizomic, with interconnections creating multiplicities. While IAS connects most elites in Makassar, not all relationships are active in every context. Interviews revealed these networks were not engaged in every action to achieve goals. According to IAS, different political agendas require different actor configurations, and an extensive network enables selecting connections for specific agendas. IAS noted that local elections involve most network parties, while policy formulation involves fewer parties. Networks provide connections to support actions, and selecting appropriate connections is vital for executing agendas and translating relationships into political objectives.

Each subject in the elite network operates within a distinct relational context. The multiplicity from these diverse relationships forms a rhizomatic network interconnecting disparate elements. This multiplicity gives elites flexibility to form temporal assemblages to achieve specific political objectives. During political events, this complexity allows elites to dominate processes by territorializing multiplicities—leveraging attributes, forging alliances, and facilitating new elite emergence to optimize relationships as capital.

They are susceptible to alterations through disruptive events, challenger elites, or shifts in collective affect. Such factors can create flight lines, triggering deterritorialization. When deterritorialization occurs, key relations within the multiplicity dissolve, diminishing elite

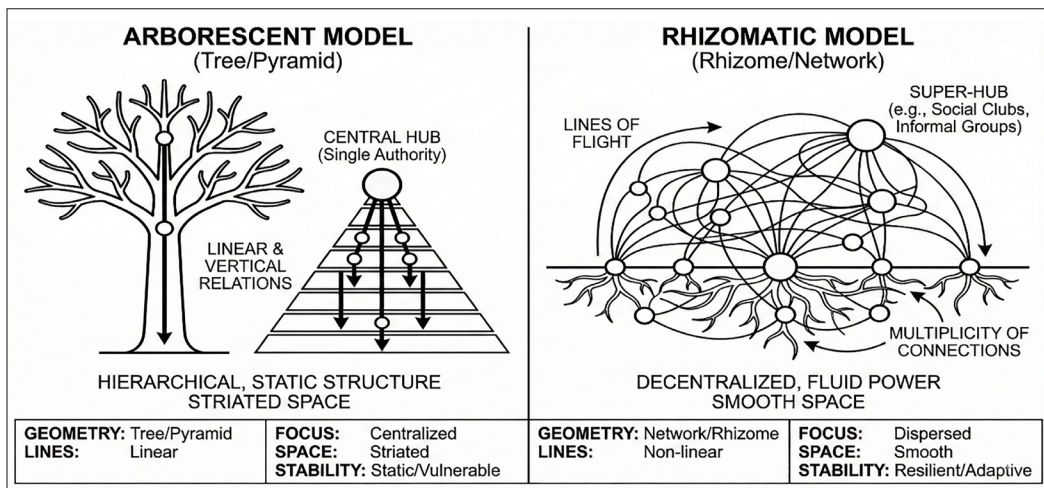


Figure 2. Comparison of multiplicities between arborescent networks and rhizomatic networks (Author’s original Conceptual diagram)

Source: Authors’ elaboration. Left panel adapted from traditional hierarchical network models (cf. Wasserman & Faust, 1994); right panel developed from Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) rhizomatic principles.

influence and power. This can lead to strategic repositioning or power reduction, demonstrating the perpetual flux within the elite assemblage.

Unlike hierarchical structures where single conflicts can sever relationships, connections among elites like IAS and SYL are multi-layered assemblages encompassing friendship, political rivalry, bureaucratic duty, and business interests. This multiplicity provides resilience; when one dimension fractures, others, like informal gatherings or hobby club solidarity, serve as buffers, enabling influence to be negotiated across social contexts. Consequently, power emerges as a fluid effect from the elite's capacity to weave these complex relational layers within a rhizomatic network.

Spatiality: The Territorialization of Power

The exercise of elite power in Makassar is spatial, a territorialization process where influence expands by linking diverse domains. The city's elite network assembles individuals from politics, business, bureaucracy, and culture, shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts. Each elite acts as a node of multiplicity, embodying connections in multiple spaces. This creates a rhizomatic network where societal territories are woven through personal relationships, enabling elites to bridge domains. This section analyzes how elites accumulate power by integrating spaces, showing how linked territories articulate collective influence, arguing elite power correlates with the number and nature of spaces they territorialize.

Within Makassar's elite network, interconnected spaces facilitate engagement. Individuals with influential backgrounds share arenas with elites from economic, bureaucratic, military, and political sectors. Ilham Arief Sirajuddin (IAS) is linked to a network of power spaces, wielding influence over Makassar's populace through connections. IAS is connected to various social, cultural, economic, and political domains through elites controlling other power areas. Ilham Arief Sirajuddin held positions including manager and general chairman of the Makassar PSM football team, General Secretary of REI South Sulawesi, Daily Chairman of AMPI South Sulawesi, Honorary Member of Black Belt Inkanas Forki Makassar, Chairman of HDCI Makassar (Harley Davidson Club Indonesia), Trustee of Makassar Tiger Club South Sulawesi, Chairman of KBPPP (Big Family of Sons and Daughters of the National Police), South Sulawesi, Chairman of RAPI (Radio Antar Penduduk Indonesia), and South Sulawesi, among others.

Elites linked to IAS support his political aims. Organizations like Pemuda Pancasila, Laskar Merah Putih, the Street Busker Group (KPJ), and other groups connect to IAS through organizational elites from his mayoral tenure. This network includes ties based on primordial links, religion, hobbies, and student groups. IAS benefits from these connections, while network elites gain advantages. During IAS's leadership of HDCI Makassar, elite members, including military officials, prosecutors, police officers, lawyers, bureaucrats, and businesspeople, provided IAS benefits through policy access and resources. As mayor, IAS accommodated connected elites' interests through facilities, entertainment, policy access, and resources, integral to his role.

Power is not solely concentrated within the elite in Ilham Arief Sirajuddin's case; rather, power and influence are acquired through various domains of power, either directly or through relationships with specific elites. Power is spatial and operates within a space characterized by specific knowledge that shapes structures and agencies. Efforts to broaden power involve accumulating diverse spaces and establishing networks that interconnect powers in each space, forming a broader multiplicity. This requires territorialization, wherein elites make adjustments to be accepted in specific spaces. This is because spatial transitions result in territorialization, where power and knowledge may not be effective in different spaces.

“Every place I visit and every person I encounter possesses unique characteristics. However, one of my advantages as Mayor is that it allows me to be readily accepted in many places.” (IAS, 2023).

When elites enter a new environment, they must adapt by comprehending the diverse knowledge present, forming the basis for their behavior. This becomes territorialization, as the elites claim positions within that space. The nomadic elite uses various spaces to extract resources and knowledge without becoming bound to any single one. During deterritorialization, when a space’s structure is challenged, the elites do not start anew. The cycle of territorialization-deterritorialization-reterritorialization thus aligns with nomadism, where elite power transforms through each journey rather than being defined by a fixed space.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the complex, fragmented, and dynamic nature of power in cities such as Makassar necessitates a fundamental theoretical shift. By applying a Deleuzo-Guattarian lens, we move beyond the arborescent, hierarchical models of classical elite theory to propose a rhizomatic understanding of elite formation and power. Our findings from urban Indonesia reveal that elites are not a stable, cohesive class occupying the apex of a social pyramid, but rather fluid, contingent, and spatially embedded assemblages whose power is constantly negotiated, enacted, and reconfigured within decentralized networks.

The Rhizomatic Network Analysis (RNA) developed in this study provides a robust framework for capturing this complexity. Through its triple focus on fluidity, multiplicity, and spatiality, RNA allows us to reconceptualize elite power in three profound ways.

First, we show that elites are not stable groups but contingent formations produced by shifting contexts. The trajectories of Mulyadi Prayitno, Faisal Sahabuddin, and Ilham Arief Sirajuddin illustrate that elite status is a process of “becoming,” not a permanent state of “being.” This status is secured through territorialization but remains vulnerable to deterritorializing events, from corruption scandals to shifts in political alliances. This fluidity ensures that no single elite can dominate the network indefinitely, and power circulates in an unpredictable manner, particularly in Southeast Asia’s volatile political economies.

Second, our analysis confirms that elite power is spatially distributed, operating across intersecting networks. The IAS-SYL relationship, which encompassed friendship, rivalry, and bureaucratic interaction, deconstructs the myth of the unified elite subject. This multiplicity of elite ties provides remarkable resilience and strategic flexibility, allowing elites to navigate conflicts and leverage different identities across contexts. Power emerges from the nodes and connections of the rhizome itself, functioning as a “super-hub” that enables collective action rather than unilateral domination.

Third, this study shows that elite formation is a spatial practice reflecting collective aspirations shaped by affective, discursive, and material dynamics. Elites in Makassar derive influence from acting as “nomads,” accumulating and moving across power territories, from city hall meeting rooms to Harley Davidson Club gatherings. This ability to connect “smooth” and “striated” spaces and translate influence across them drives their power (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Their reach depends on the scale of the spatial assemblage they commandeer.

The findings of this study carry three practical implications. First, for urban governance, recognizing that power operates through informal, rhizomatic networks suggests that formal anti-corruption or transparency reforms alone are insufficient; effective governance interventions must map and engage with the actual relational circuits through which decisions are made. Second,

for political sociology, the fluidity of elite status challenges static typologies of elite types (e.g., “political,” “economic,” “cultural”) and instead calls for process-based analyses that track how actors move across these categories. Third, for Indonesian local politics, the case of Makassar shows that democratic decentralization has not produced stable, rule-based elite competition but rather has intensified rhizomatic fragmentation; policymakers should therefore focus on building accountability mechanisms that cut across informal networks rather than reinforcing formal hierarchies.

Although the rhizomatic approach is powerful, it is not without limitations. Furthermore, tracing the intricate, multi-layered webs of elite relationships is methodologically demanding and requires significant time and nuanced qualitative interpretation.

Nevertheless, this framework provides a compelling and necessary alternative for understanding elite formations in the Global South, where traditional class-based or institutional analyses often fall short. By shifting the analytical focus from who the elites are to how elite formations work, we offer a more dynamic and accurate portrait of contemporary power. Future research could build on this foundation by exploring how specific political practices, such as corruption, social mobilization, or digital campaigning, are enabled or constrained within these rhizomatic assemblages.

Authorship Contributions

All authors have contributed sufficiently to the manuscript to take public responsibility for its content. Their contributions include conception, design, data collection, analysis, and writing.

AI Use Declaration

The authors declare that no generative AI was used for data collection, analysis, theoretical interpretation, or generating original content. AI (Paperpal) was used only for minor grammar and proofreading assistance without altering meaning or findings. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and originality of the manuscript.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Author’s Institution Research Ethics Committee. All 25 participants provided written informed consent, with guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, particularly for politically sensitive information. No vulnerable populations were involved, and data were stored securely.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that there are no competing interests, financial or non-financial, that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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