



# Discourse and Influence: Community Opinion Leaders in the Formation of a New Autonomous Region in Teluk Bintuni, West Papua

Andi Rosdiana NK<sup>1</sup>, Andi Alimuddin Unde<sup>2</sup>, Muh. Akbar<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Department of Communication Science, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Hasanuddin University, Indonesia

## Abstract

The formation of new autonomous regions in Indonesia's reform era is fundamentally a bottom-up process driven by community dynamics, local elites, and political mobilization, in which community opinion leaders play a decisive communicative role. This study analyzes the discourse of community opinion leaders in the formation of the proposed New Autonomous Region of Babo Raya Regency in Teluk Bintuni, West Papua, Indonesia. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach with critical discourse analysis, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving seven key informants comprising the regional formation drafting team, local legislators, customary leaders, and religious figures. The analysis addresses two dimensions: how community opinion leaders influence the regional formation process, and the communication strategies they employ to shape public opinion and behavior. Findings reveal that opinion leaders function as information brokers, trend setters, and advisors who mediate information flows between formal authorities and the wider community, translating administrative and political developments into locally meaningful narratives. Their discourse mobilizes shared aspirations regarding improved public services, accelerated development, and indigenous self-determination, while constructing a dominant pro-formation narrative that marginalizes skeptical perspectives. The communication strategies combine equalitarian and structuring approaches, leveraging customary authority, religious legitimacy, and kinship networks to build consensus across dispersed communities. The study demonstrates that regional formation outcomes depend substantially on the discursive and relational capacities of opinion leaders, offering insights into political communication in geographically remote and culturally distinctive contexts.

**Keywords:** opinion leaders; discourse analysis; new autonomous region; political communication; two-step flow

## Introduction

The formation of new administrative regions constitutes a significant dimension of Indonesia's decentralization trajectory in the post-reform era. Article 33 of Law Number 23 of 2014 stipulates that regional formation involves the division of a province or regency into two or more new regions, or the merging of adjacent territorial segments within a single province. The proliferation of regional formation in the reform era is closely linked to several principal factors: the global wave of democratization and good governance aspirations, the national transition from the centralistic New Order regime toward decentralization, and increasing political consciousness generating demands for regional autonomy (Tanjung, 2021; Soloviov, 2022). This evolution reflects broader transformations in center-periphery relations within the unitary state framework.

Regional formation in the reform era exhibits a distinctly bottom-up character, originating from community dynamics, local elites, and political groups. The formation of new regions typically commences with the establishment of committees comprising diverse stakeholders, frequently followed by mass mobilization before proposals are submitted to central policymakers through the Ministry of Home Affairs, the national legislature, and regional representative councils. Indonesia's regional autonomy has undergone significant evolution through legislative reform, with Law Number 23 of 2014 affirming that regional autonomy encompasses the rights and responsibilities of regional governments to manage their affairs independently, an arrangement essential for strengthening local governance and enhancing public service delivery (Kurniawati & Pratama, 2021; Trisakti & Djajasinga, 2021).

The proposed formation of the New Autonomous Region of Babo Raya Regency in Teluk Bintuni, West Papua, exemplifies the implementation of regional autonomy aimed at improving public services and community welfare. Teluk Bintuni Regency comprises 24 districts, 2 urban villages, and 115 villages, with the Babo Raya area encompassing the districts of Babo, Sumuri, Kaitaro, Aroba, Kuri, Wamesa, and Fafurwar. On 31 August 2023, the Regent of Teluk Bintuni inaugurated the regional formation initiative at Trikora Babo Field, marking a significant milestone in a movement whose origins trace back to the year 2000. The formation proposal has been nationally registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs, with documents submitted to the national legislature, the regional representative council, and the coordinating ministry for political, legal, and security affairs, accompanied by joint approval decisions from the regency government and legislature.

Within this process, community opinion leaders occupy a pivotal position, possessing the capacity to influence public opinion and shape community perceptions regarding the formation policy through effective communication. Opinion leaders emerge from diverse backgrounds including customary leaders, religious figures,

and community notables, mediating information flows between formal authorities and the broader population. The analysis of opinion leader discourse offers a means of understanding how language and communication are deployed to influence public opinion and shape policy, illuminating the relationship between communicative practice and political mobilization in regional formation. This communicative dimension assumes heightened significance in geographically remote and culturally distinctive contexts such as Papua, where information access remains uneven and customary authority structures retain substantial influence (Aswar et al., 2026).

Despite extensive scholarship on regional formation in Indonesia, existing studies predominantly emphasize administrative feasibility, political economy, and electoral dimensions, while communicative and discursive aspects of the formation process remain underexamined. Prior research has analyzed regional formation as a campaign issue, examined feasibility challenges, and investigated community perceptions, yet limited attention has addressed how opinion leaders discursively construct and mobilize support for regional formation through communication strategies. This gap is particularly pronounced in the Papuan context, where the intersection of indigenous self-determination aspirations, customary authority, and decentralization policy creates distinctive communicative dynamics warranting systematic investigation.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing the discourse of community opinion leaders in the formation of the New Autonomous Region of Babo Raya Regency through two analytical lenses: the two-step flow of communication theory and Foucauldian discourse analysis. The two-step flow theory, originally formulated by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) and developed by Katz, conceptualizes opinion leaders as intermediaries through whom information flows from mass media to less active community members. Foucauldian discourse analysis, conversely, illuminates how discourse produces knowledge and exercises power, constructing dominant narratives while marginalizing alternative perspectives. The research objectives encompass examining how community opinion leaders influence the regional formation process, and analyzing the communication strategies they employ to shape public opinion and behavior, thereby contributing to understanding political communication in regional formation within geographically and culturally distinctive settings.

## Materials And Methods

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to examine the discourse of community opinion leaders in the formation of the New Autonomous Region of Babo Raya Regency in Teluk Bintuni, West Papua, Indonesia. The qualitative approach was selected to elucidate naturally occurring phenomena through detailed description of activities and contexts, enabling profound understanding of complex and subjective social phenomena (Bungin, 2015). Critical discourse analysis, particularly the Foucauldian perspective, was adopted as the analytical framework because it examines language not merely as linguistic structure but in relation to power, knowledge production, and the construction of social subjects. The research was conducted in Teluk Bintuni Regency, focusing on the proposed Babo Raya region, with data collection occurring from September to November 2025, encompassing preparation, implementation, and analysis phases.

Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with seven purposively selected key informants possessing direct involvement in or knowledge of the regional formation process: the Head and Secretary of the Regional Formation Drafting Team, the Chairperson and members of the regency legislature including a Special Autonomy faction representative, a customary leader, and a religious figure. Secondary data were drawn from relevant institutions, scholarly literature, official documents, and online media. Data collection techniques comprised participatory observation using observation guidelines, structured and in-depth interviews using interview protocols, and documentation analysis of documents, photographs, videos, and official reports. Data analysis followed the interactive model encompassing data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification, wherein collected data were systematically condensed, organized into narrative and tabular forms, and interpreted to derive findings. Data validity and reliability were ensured through trustworthiness criteria encompassing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 The Influence of Community Opinion Leaders on the Regional Formation Process

The formation of the New Autonomous Region of Babo Raya demonstrates the central role of community opinion leaders in mediating between formal political processes and grassroots community understanding. Within the Babo Raya context, opinion leaders comprise customary leaders, religious figures, members of the regional formation drafting team, and local legislators who collectively channel information regarding the formation initiative to dispersed communities across seven districts. These figures occupy positions of high social credibility derived from customary authority, religious legitimacy, and demonstrated commitment to regional development aspirations, enabling them to function as trusted information sources whose interpretations carry substantial weight in shaping community perceptions.

Opinion leaders influence the formation process primarily through their function as information brokers who translate complex administrative and political developments into locally meaningful narratives. The regional formation process involves intricate procedural requirements including documentation submission to the Ministry of Home Affairs, joint approval decisions from the regency government and legislature, and coordination with national legislative bodies. Community members, particularly in remote districts with limited information access, depend upon opinion leaders to interpret these developments and articulate their implications for community welfare. This brokerage function positions opinion leaders as essential intermediaries whose communicative activity determines the extent and accuracy of community understanding regarding the formation initiative.

Beyond information transmission, opinion leaders exercise influence as trend setters and advisors whose endorsement legitimizes the formation aspiration. Customary leaders invoke indigenous self-determination and territorial identity, framing regional formation as a vehicle for advancing Papuan interests and expanding opportunities for indigenous participation in governance. Religious figures contribute moral legitimacy, situating the formation initiative within broader aspirations for community advancement and social welfare. Members of the drafting team and legislators provide procedural authority, articulating the technical progress and political viability of the formation proposal. The convergence of these diverse sources of authority constructs a multifaceted endorsement that strengthens community confidence in the formation initiative.

**Table 1.** Roles and Functions of Community Opinion Leaders in the Babo Raya Regional Formation

Opinion Leader Category	Primary Role	Source of Authority	Influence Function
Customary Leaders	Trend setter	Indigenous customary legitimacy	Frames formation as self-determination
Religious Figures	Advisor	Moral and religious authority	Provides moral legitimacy
Drafting Team	Information broker	Procedural and technical knowledge	Translates administrative progress
Local Legislators	Authority figure	Formal political mandate	Bridges community and government
Special Autonomy Faction	Advocate	Special autonomy mandate	Links formation to Papuan rights

Source: Primary data analysis based on interviews and documentation, 2025

Interpreting these findings through the two-step flow of communication theory developed by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948) reveals that opinion leaders in Babo Raya operate precisely as the theory predicts, functioning as intermediaries through whom information flows from formal sources and mass media to less active community members. The theory's central proposition, that media effects reach the public not directly but through the mediating interpretation of opinion leaders, is strongly corroborated by the documented dependence of remote communities on customary leaders, religious figures, and the drafting team for interpreting formation developments. Recent research confirms the enduring explanatory power of this model, demonstrating that opinion leaders retain a cardinal role in shaping perceptions and directing attention even within contemporary information environments (Zheng et al., 2022; Hunt & Gruszczynski, 2024). Yet the Babo Raya case also reflects the theory's acknowledged refinement that influence is not strictly unidirectional, since opinion leaders simultaneously absorb community aspirations and channel them upward to formal authorities, embodying the two-directional flow between transmitters and receivers that later scholarship identified, and confirming that regional formation outcomes depend substantially on the communicative agency of these intermediary figures (Choi, 2015; Casaló et al., 2020).

### 3.2 Communication Strategies of Opinion Leaders in Shaping Public Opinion and Behavior

The communication strategies employed by opinion leaders in the Babo Raya formation reflect deliberate efforts to construct consensus and mobilize support across geographically dispersed and culturally diverse communities. Opinion leaders predominantly adopt equalitarian communication approaches characterized by open, participatory dialogue conducted in relaxed and informal settings, enabling community members to articulate aspirations and concerns regarding the formation initiative. This approach cultivates shared understanding and collective ownership of the formation aspiration, fostering empathy and cooperation in addressing the complex challenges inherent in regional formation processes.

Complementing the equalitarian approach, opinion leaders employ structuring communication strategies that systematically articulate the objectives, procedures, and anticipated benefits of regional formation. Through both verbal and written messages, opinion leaders establish coherent narratives explaining the rationale for formation, the procedural progress achieved, and the developmental opportunities anticipated. These structured communications address community questions regarding the formation process, clarify misconceptions, and reinforce the legitimacy of the formation aspiration. The combination of equalitarian openness and structuring clarity enables opinion leaders to balance participatory engagement with directional guidance toward the formation objective.

The communication strategies are substantially mediated through customary authority, religious legitimacy, and kinship networks that structure social relations in the Babo Raya communities. Opinion leaders leverage customary forums and religious gatherings as communicative spaces for disseminating formation narratives and building consensus. Kinship networks facilitate the diffusion of formation discourse through trusted interpersonal channels, extending the reach of opinion leader messaging into dispersed communities. This embeddedness within indigenous social structures enhances the persuasive efficacy of opinion leader communication, as messages transmitted through culturally legitimate channels carry greater credibility than impersonal mass media communication.

**Table 2.** Communication Strategies of Opinion Leaders in the Babo Raya Regional Formation

Communication Strategy	Implementation	Intended Effect
Equalitarian Style	Open dialogue in informal customary settings	Builds shared understanding and consensus
Structuring Style	Systematic verbal and written explanation of process	Clarifies objectives and procedures
Customary Channels	Dissemination through customary forums	Leverages indigenous legitimacy
Religious Channels	Messaging through religious gatherings	Provides moral reinforcement
Kinship Networks	Interpersonal diffusion through family ties	Extends reach via trusted channels

Source: Primary data analysis based on interviews and field observation, 2025

Interpreting these communication strategies through Foucauldian discourse analysis reveals that opinion leaders in Babo Raya do not merely transmit information but actively produce a dominant discourse that constructs the regional formation as necessary, beneficial, and legitimate. Foucault's conception of discourse as a productive force that generates knowledge and exercises power, rather than a neutral set of statements, illuminates how opinion leaders construct a regime of truth in which regional formation appears as the self-evident pathway to community welfare and indigenous advancement. The dominant pro-formation narrative, reinforced through customary, religious, and kinship channels, directs how the formation initiative must be understood while marginalizing skeptical perspectives that question its feasibility or warn of elite capture, exemplifying the Foucauldian dynamic whereby dominant discourse renders alternative viewpoints submerged or peripheral (Aswar et al., 2026; Pitsoe & Letseka, 2023). This discursive construction is inseparable from power relations, as opinion leaders mobilize their customary, religious, and political authority to produce and legitimate the formation narrative, demonstrating Foucault's thesis that knowledge and power are mutually constitutive and that discourse shapes not only understanding but also the behavior and identities of community subjects (Flood et al., 2022). The communication strategies thus function simultaneously as instruments of consensus-building and as mechanisms of discursive power that channel community opinion toward the formation aspiration.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study analyzed the discourse of community opinion leaders in the formation of the New Autonomous Region of Babo Raya Regency in Teluk Bintuni, West Papua, examining how opinion leaders influence the formation process and the communication strategies they employ to shape public opinion and behavior. The analysis reveals that opinion leaders, comprising customary leaders, religious figures, drafting team members, and local legislators, function as essential intermediaries who mediate information flows between formal authorities and dispersed communities. Operating as information brokers, trend setters, and advisors, these figures translate complex administrative and political developments into locally meaningful narratives, leveraging customary authority, religious legitimacy, and demonstrated commitment to regional development to construct a credible endorsement of the formation aspiration. Their influence proves decisive in shaping community understanding and mobilizing support across geographically remote and culturally distinctive districts.

The communication strategies employed combine equalitarian openness with structuring clarity, mediated through customary forums, religious gatherings, and kinship networks that enhance persuasive efficacy within indigenous social structures. Beyond consensus-building, these strategies construct a dominant discourse that renders regional formation as a self-evident pathway to community welfare and indigenous advancement, while marginalizing skeptical perspectives. The findings demonstrate that regional formation outcomes depend substantially on the discursive and relational capacities of opinion leaders, who not only transmit information but actively produce knowledge and exercise communicative power in shaping political reality. These insights contribute to understanding political communication in regional formation within geographically and culturally distinctive contexts, underscoring the importance of opinion leaders as both communicative intermediaries and discursive agents. Future research should extend this analysis through comparative studies across regional formation initiatives and longitudinal investigation of how opinion leader discourse evolves through the protracted formation process, contributing to richer understanding of communication and power in decentralization dynamics.

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