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## 5 The independent *kabupaten*

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I have looked at how and why a multitude of politically engaged individuals became involved in various official and less official local organisations. In this chapter I will look at how these politically inspired people have made use of these organisations in order to empower their ever-stronger growing request for self-government and administrative independency from Padang-Pariaman. The heydays of their lobby took place during the last few years of the previous century and eventually led to the establishment of the independent district Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai in October 1999. The intense political turmoil that ensued soon after this liberating event forms the largest part of the descriptive elements of this chapter. The appointing of a *bupati* (head of district), the installing of the local parliament (DPRD – *Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*) and the formation of the basic governmental structure were all highly politicised, laborious and time-consuming processes. Data used for this chapter are mainly based on interviews with individuals involved in the above mentioned processes and events. I have furthermore gathered data in both Padang and Mentawai, through local newspapers and frequent visits to local NGOs.

### The lobby

During the last five years of the 1990s the Mentawaian request for more self-determination became more and more insistent and provocative. Various politically engaged Mentawaians openly solicited for self-government and administrative independency from Padang-Pariaman. Whereas there were basically no Mentawaians active within the local politics, they were unable to influence the system from within. Therefore the government in Pariaman, the provincial government in Padang and even the central government in Jakarta were increasingly addressed by means of letter campaigns, protest actions and personal visits by members of the Mentawaian elite. Some of them acted on their own account, but more often their organisations were used to punctuate their claims. Several of the protest letters were written and signed by individual organisations. But in the course of the 1990s, more and more of the letters were signed by a consortium of local organisations using the name of Forum Komunikasi

Masyarakat Mentawai (FKMM).<sup>135</sup> The protest letters invariably contained of an exposition of why development in the Mentawai Archipelago had failed and was always followed by a request for political and administrative independency from the Padang-Pariaman district. Whereas the letters never received any substantial reaction from either Pariaman or Padang, FKMM later also forwarded the letters to the authorities in Jakarta, soliciting for action from the central powers directly. When even Jakarta failed to respond to their letters, it was insinuated that a Jakarta-based Minangkabau official originating from Pariaman overdoing his loyalty to the Minangkabau homeland, had withheld the letters. Then a small Mentawaian delegation, including Kortanius Sabeleake, Levi Sirirui and Rijel Samaloisa headed for Jakarta in order to discuss matters in person with the designated authorities. The FKMM delegation managed to discuss their concerns and hopes for the Mentawai Archipelago with members of the national parliament, but the meeting never had a substantive follow-up; at least not then.

Next to the somewhat subdued letter campaigns there were various protest actions. Most of these protest actions complete with banners and loudly chanted slogans took place in Padang, in front of the governor's office. One of these larger protest actions took place on 15 July 1998. Some 200 Mentawaians had gathered in front of the governor's office. Amongst the protesters were representatives of YCM, LBH Padang, IPPMEN and FORPEM.<sup>136</sup> Apart from these people, on whose initiative the protest action had arisen, there were various village heads, clan and religious leaders who had travelled from Mentawai to Padang for the occasion. For many of them, their expenses for travel and accommodation had been covered by YCM. The majority of the crowd, however, was formed by Mentawaian students mobilised by IPPMEN. In a meeting with governor, Muchlis Ibrahim, it was stated that the so-called development policies of the last 30 years had victimised the Mentawaians as well as the natural resources present within the Mentawai Archipelago. Rather than lifting the Mentawaians from their state of ignorance and poverty, they argued that Suharto's Orde Baru policies had destroyed Mentawaian culture and identity and had furthermore deprived the Mentawaians of their natural resources. With the Orde Baru regime expired just two months earlier, the Mentawaians clearly grabbed this momentum to stake their claims towards change with regard to the way in which the Mentawai Archipelago had been governed so far. The protesters explained to the governor how Mentawai had become a receptacle for second-class civil servants who were either not interested in or simply not capable of contributing to the sound development of the archipelago. They therefore urged the governor to prioritise Mentawaians for the fulfilment of vacancies in the local bureaucracy and to look into possibilities to detach the Mentawai Archipelago from the Padang-Pariaman district by granting the archipelago independent district status as soon as possible. They continued their plea by requesting the governor for a review of the legality of PT MPLC operating on the Pagai Islands and two smaller logging companies (like MPLC also in the hands

<sup>135</sup> Forum Komunikasi Masyarakat Mentawai was fluid in composition. At some occasions FKMM consisted of twenty organisations while at other instances of only five or six organisations.

<sup>136</sup> Forum Pemuda Mentawai (FORPEM) is a Jakarta-based student organisation promoting the interests of Mentawaian students outside Padang.

of Suharto's daughter Titik Prabowo) active on Siberut. According to the protesters the logging corporations did not operate in accordance with lawful agreements, causing severe conflicts between and even within family clans. The very presence of these logging corporations was considered a violation of the rights of local *adat* communities that in this new political era could no longer be tolerated. The latter argument was also used to question the legality of the national park on Siberut that was established on the island without the consent of local communities, violating their control over their ancestral lands. The governor was then also asked to withdraw all plans to establish large-scale oil palm plantations in Mentawai. The negotiations over possible compensation schemes alone had already ensued conflict within the affected communities, so it was stated. Without making any real promises, the governor said that he, together with the Mentawaian community would strive for the aspirations of the Mentawaians to become reality. While at that time it remained rather vague what he actually meant, it was in early 1999 that he appointed Antonius Samonggilailai, an Islamic Mentawaian originating from Sipora, as the *camat* (head of sub-district) of South Siberut.

Also intensively lobbying for an independent Mentawai was Bakri Tasirebbeb. Allegedly speaking on behalf of the Islamic Mentawaian community, Bakri, through his organisation Badan Musyawarah Masyarakat Mentawai (BM3), lobbied mainly behind the scenes and directly with the authorities in both Padang and Pariaman. Bakri frequently visited the district authorities, building personal relationships amongst others with Zainal Bakar, the then *bupati* of the Padang-Pariaman district. But apart from the minority of Islamic Mentawaians, Bakri met with little support for his lobby from the wider Mentawaian community. Many judged his interference as inappropriate and suspected him of having a hidden agenda. Although Bakri was beloved by a considerable number of Mentawaians, he remained an outsider none the less. Despite his proximity with the officials, Bakri was not successful in convincing them to change their policies with regard to the Mentawai Archipelago.

Whereas the FKMM visit to Jakarta had not led to a satisfactory result, in late 1998 the so-called *Tim Sembilan* (Team Nine) was established. In the hope to really impress the authorities in Jakarta this time, *Tim Sembilan* was composed of nine elderly Mentawaians, among whom the fathers of Parmen Sabola' and Yonlifran Siritotet. With the financial aid of Yayasan Kondisi and the practical help of FORPEM-Jakarta, *Tim Sembilan* headed for the presidential palace in order to speak to the president.<sup>137</sup> *Tim Sembilan* did not manage to speak with the president directly, but was received by several members of the national parliament to whom the members of the delegation once more submitted the aspirations of the Mentawaian community.

Only several weeks later both Edison Saleleubaja and Yonlifran went on a business trip to Jakarta. During this trip Edison and Yonlifran met with Sintong Panjaitan, a high-

<sup>137</sup> It was Rijel Samaloisa who at that time studied political science at Universitas Kristen Indonesia (UKI) in Jakarta and simultaneously acted as the chairman of the Jakarta-based Forum Pemuda Mentawai (FORPEM). He organised all logistics involved in the *Tim Sembilan* being in Jakarta.

ranking military in the Indonesian army. With him they once more discussed the situation at hand in the Mentawai Archipelago and the fact that their persistent call for political and administrative independence had so far not met with any reaction. For reasons not completely clear to me this meeting finally triggered a reaction from the national parliament (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat* - DPR). It was then that the DPR decided to send an investigation team to Mentawai in order to research the possibility of the Mentawai Archipelago to detach itself from the Padang-Pariaman district.

## Independency at last

Decentralisation and regional autonomy triggered an intensified request from many regions in Indonesia that wished to become autonomous provinces and districts. Especially the introduction of regional autonomy formed the fertile ground that was so much needed for the Mentawaian request for political independence to germinate. During the last few months of the Suharto administration as well as in the period directly after his withdrawal, the Mentawaian lobby for independence from Padang-Pariaman had been so intensive that their request for independence had remained on top of the stack and was therefore one of the first requests for *pemekaran* to be inquired. Already in early 1999 it became obvious that Mentawai would be granted political and administrative independence from Padang-Pariaman, but this decision became official only in October 1999 due to disagreements with regard to land and the location of the new district's capital. The investigation team that was sent to Mentawai by the DPR after Edison and Yonlifran had once more presented their request to the high ranking military officer, had not been able to determine where the capital of the newly to be established *kabupaten* should be located. It was expected that the establishment of the capital would provide a huge boost to local employment and the level of development in general. Therefore representatives of the various Mentawai islands were very eager to get the capital located on 'their' island. People almost literally fell over each other in order to promote their island as the most suitable for the location for the capital and the governmental office complex. People from Siberut said that the island of Siberut had historically seen always been the centre of the archipelago and that the capital should therefore be located on Siberut. People from Pagai said that Pagai already had the best infrastructure in place and that the capital should thus be located on Pagai. And people from Sipora stated that they had attention wise always been in between the islands of Siberut and Pagai and that it now was their turn to take a place in the spotlight. The investigation team from Jakarta inspected three possible locations, Silaoinan-Saureinuk on Sipora, Nemnem Leleu-Sikakap on North Pagai and Maileppet-Muara Siberut on Siberut, but met with insurmountable problems as soon as the owners of the land in these locations were requested to make their lands available for the construction of a governmental office complex. After intense negotiations none of the approached land-owners turned out to be willing to sell their lands. After the investigation team returned empty handed to Jakarta, Melki Tatubekket, a protestant reverend active for GKPM on Sipora who is also working for PT Sinula and who is Rijel Samaloisa's father in law, negotiated with Ali Akbar, a Minangkabau migrant who owns some ten hectares of land around the harbour village of Tuapeijat on Sipora. Eventually it was this Minangkabau

migrant who made his land available for the building of the governmental office complex. As soon as these negotiations were confirmed by Jakarta, president Habibie signed law 49/1999 that officially turned Mentawai into an independent *kabupaten*. 4 October 1999 has entered the history books as *hari jadi Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai*, the day that Mentawai became an independent district. People were over the moon and absolutely confident that the newly carved out district would, within the two years set for its transition period, turn into a resounding success. The new *kabupaten* would be evaluated by the end of 2001 and in case its independency would be unsatisfactory, the archipelago would be reinserted in the Padang-Pariaman district. There was a lot of work to be done, a lot of new opportunities ensued and the Mentawaians plunged themselves en masse into this new, highly political arena. Branch offices for various political parties were opened in Mentawai, many elite members joined a political party, others opened new businesses they linked with individuals they believed to become influential within the political arena, people started a lobby for more sub-districts, others wrote a proposal for the village structure to be revised and finally many people applied for a job in the civil service.

### The interim *bupati*

After president Habibie signed for the Mentawai Archipelago to become an independent district, the interim governor of West Sumatra, Duniidja was entrusted with the task to shape the new district.<sup>138</sup> Governor Duniidja appointed Badril Bakar, a Minangkabau with no previous experience within Mentawai, as the interim *bupati* of the Mentawai Archipelago. Already at age, Badril was a senior politician, obviously in the aftermath of his political career. Another Minangkabau, Aztarmizi, who had been acting as an adjunct to the assistant *bupati* for the Mentawai region during the 1980s, was installed as the vice *bupati*. Badril was given the task to shape and install a local parliament (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah - DPRD) and to set up the local bureaucratic structure. Badril was furthermore responsible for the development of a governmental office complex in the village of Tuapeijat. Whereas there were basically no facilities whatsoever available in Tuapeijat at that time, all governmental offices, paved access roads and even electricity and running water had to be established and the quay in the harbour was in need of renovation. The intention was to accomplish these two major tasks within a year. The newly installed local DPRD would then elect the permanent *bupati* after which Badril's appointment would automatically end.

Badril's appointment met with disbelief and fierce opposition. Various Mentawaians NGOs and several politically engaged individuals were especially vocal. They called for Badril to be replaced by a *putri asli daerah*, a local native to the archipelago, a Mentawaian, preferably a Christian. The term *putra asli daerah* is to be interpreted in ethnic terms, primarily differentiating between the Mentawaians and the Minangkabau, but also the Batak and to a

<sup>138</sup> Duniidja was interim governor of West Sumatra from 1999 to 2000 after governor Muchlis Ibrahim had, due to political tensions in West Sumatra, resigned before the end of his term. In early 2000 vice governor Zainal Bakar was installed as the new governor of West Sumatra.

lesser extent the Niassans. Whereas the initial lobby for more local political involvement was directed against the unreliable and corrupt Minangkabau administrators, it was a common wish that local politics now also had to be taken over by sincere and trustworthy local persons, *putra asli daerah*. The important position of that of the *bupati*, now in the hands of another Minangkabau, was simply not acceptable to the Mentawai elite.

Despite his age, his poor health and the fairly extensive task at hand, Badril was confident about the fact that development in Mentawai would finally gain momentum now that the archipelago had obtained independence from the mainland. Badril saw important development potential in the forestry sector (controversially including both logging and reforestation) as well as in agriculture (large-scheme plantations of oil palm and bananas), fisheries and tourism (two sectors that had according to Badril remained underexposed during the Padang-Pariaman era). According to Badril more than 80% of the local revenues could easily be gathered from these four sectors together, but that everything would depend on how successful the local government would be in attracting and working together with investors for these sectors.

With West Sumatra having rather comprehensive political and economic interests in Mentawai, the provincial officials were not very eager to support the process of Mentawai becoming a successful independent *kabupaten*. In order to drive the Mentawai Archipelago near the evaluation date in an unsuccessful state, various provincial political elements hampered the process of installing the DPRD. The delay in the instalment of the DPRD furthermore gave the provincial authorities the time and opportunity to finalise the procedures through which two large pending logging concessions would become operational.

The infrastructural projects in Tuapeijat also met with serious delay. As if the devil played with it, one of the most important ferries when it comes to the transport of large amounts of construction materials between Padang and Mentawai, the Barau, was docked for maintenance for more than two months. The majority of the infrastructural projects, mainly in the hands of Minangkabau contractors, were subject to corruption, skimming and money politics. The absence of sufficient fresh water was also a cause for delay. As a result many projects were slowed down initially and eventually either abandoned or finished in great haste. Almost without exception projects were completed with inferior materials and transferred in such a state that substantial additional work was needed before the new facility could actually be put to use. Both electricity and running water were in almost all instances lacking. Many of the governmental offices were built amidst the remains of the vegetation that was cut in order to clear the construction area. Once finished, the offices were handed over without the surrounding area being cleared. Access roads were often still lacking, confronting those willing to enter the office with the challenge to cross at least three ditches and half a hectare of newly developed land littered with withering vegetation and construction waste. When Badril, on 14 September 2000, received the administrative records from the *bupati* of Pariaman, various offices were not in place yet. As a result some of the records remained in Padang, while others were already transferred to Tuapeijat.

Badril, working from an office complex on Jalan Nipah in Padang that was specifically hired to temporarily harbour the interim government, did little to remedy the above-mentioned problems. The fact that Badril was operating from Padang created too big a distance between him and the performing parties on the Mentawai Islands to make effective monitoring of the projects possible. It was only in November 2000 that Badril went to Tuapejat in order to personally inspect the activities of a contractor working on the construction of the main road there. The delay in this project had also been substantial and when Badril recognised that the contractor was indeed not working according to plan, he dismissed the contractor company then and there. But despite this rather bold action, many condemned the interference as being executed far too late.

Although it was Badril's responsibility to orchestrate the composing of the DPRD, the hampering of this process was caused by forces that were largely beyond his sphere of influence. Knowing that he would be fighting against the odds, Badril avoided taking an outspoken stance in this matter. It was especially his choice not to take a strong position in the political game that was played with regard to the composing of the DPRD that placed Badril under constant attack of extremely critical Mentawai voices. Various public figures (like Yudas Sabaggalet), spokes persons of various local NGOs (like Kortanious Sabeleake' and Kurnia Sakerebau) and several candidates for the DPRD (like Agustinus Sabebeben and San Andi Ikhlas) ventilated their hostility towards Badril whenever an opportunity occurred, making sure that Badril's missteps as well as their displeasure about them were extensively publicised in the local newspapers. In April 2000 a large Mentawai crowd (some 1000 people) gathered in front of governor Zainal Bakar's office in Padang requesting the replacement of Badril. Apart from the fact that they considered Badril not capable of monitoring the delicate process of Mentawai becoming a successful independent district, the protesters also stated that the Mentawai Archipelago was in need of an autochthonous leader, a *putra asli daerah*. While Zainal told the protesters that he was inclined to fulfil their requests, no changes in Badril's appointment were made on short notice.

The new financial regulations that were part of regional autonomy had underlined the importance for local governments – especially those of *kabupaten* – to carefully monitor their local revenues. Predicated and inspired by the consequences of regional autonomy but certainly not part of his job description, Badril focused on an increase of local revenues among others from the tourist sector. By the time Badril was appointed in 1999, the tourist sector in the Mentawai Archipelago was completely dominated by Australian and American entrepreneurs engaged in the booming surfing industry. In an attempt to cash in on this successful business, the governor of West Sumatra had five so-called surf zones established in the waters surrounding the Mentawai Islands already in 1996. Commercial surfing activities would only be allowed within these zones for which a permit could be obtained from the provincial Department of Culture and Tourism. The provincial government furthermore made exclusive agreements with, Rick Cameron, the earlier mentioned Australian businessman with a controversial reputation. Badril, negatively triggered by the fact that none of the revenues from the agreements between the province and the surfing industry benefitted Mentawai, discovered that several of

the foreign surfing enterprises, among which also Cameron's Mentawai Wisata Bahari, were operating in the Mentawaian waters without valid or already expired permits from the local authorities. Not inclined to renew their permits without any of the tax revenues flowing into the Mentawaian treasury, Badril did make a valid statement but simultaneously manoeuvred himself in a difficult position (that would eventually lead to his demise) with respect to the provincial authorities.

It was initially planned that the new DPRD would be installed in October 2000 and that that would also be the moment for Badril to be replaced by the permanent *bupati*. But the delay in the instalment of the DPRD was such that governor Zainal Bakar eventually decided to replace Badril prematurely. But Badril was not inclined to withdraw. So when Zainal Bakar in April 2001 appointed Antonius Samongilailai as Badril's replacement, Badril took his dismissal to court. His stance triggered contempt for his person from various sectors within society. Both in Mentawai as well as on the Sumatran mainland he was considered pathetic for his protest against his dismissal and many found it inappropriate for Badril to publicly state that he was disappointed about the fact that he was dismissed without proper reasons. Despite the fact that Badril saw his case vindicated by the court in Jakarta in June 2001, he did not return to Mentawai. Badril retired instead. Only few years after his retirement, Badril passed away.

With the choice for Antonius, recommended to the governor by Bakri Tasirebbeb, Zainal cleverly combined the Mentawaian request for a *putra asli daerah* with Sumatra's economic interests in the Mentawai Archipelago. Originating from Sipora, Antonius is an indigenous Mentawaian. Antonius' Islamic signature furthermore appealed to the expansionism of both the Minangkabau authorities in Sumatra as well as several Islamic organisations active on the Mentawai Islands, of which Bakri's Badan Musyawarah Masyarakat Mentawai (BM3) is one of the most influential.<sup>139</sup> Antonius had experience within the local bureaucracy because he had worked several years for the spatial planning department of the Padang-Pariaman district during the late 1990s. And in early 1999 governor Muchlis Ibrahim had Antonius installed as the *camat* (head of sub-district) of the South Siberut sub-district.<sup>140</sup> During the period that Antonius was *camat* for South Siberut, he had proven to be a pro-active intermediary between local communities and the government. Antonius showed a strong drive to improve the economic circumstances of local communities, not necessarily excluding the option of logging. It was exactly this attitude that made Antonius known as the governor's right hand in logging matters when during his term negotiations about the much contested pending logging concession of Koperasi Andalas Madani finally materialised. Though it never became fully clear what Antonius' role was in this matter, it was for a fact that he was installed as interim *bupati* for six months only and that his responsibilities were more limited than those of Badril had been. Antonius' main task was to reorganise the district's administration and the handling

<sup>139</sup> Antonius has a Christian background but switched to Islam during his education in Padang. It was also then that Antonius came into contact with Bakri.

<sup>140</sup> Muchlis had Antonius installed as *camat* in order to comply with the continuous request from Mentawaian NGOs to appoint more Mentawaians in the local bureaucracy.

of daily affairs. Zainal himself claimed the right to control the executive pending elections within the next few months. Antonius set himself as a candidate for these elections.

## Installing the first DPRD

One of the main tasks for Badril was to orchestrate the process through which Mentawai was to obtain a local parliament (DPRD). For this purpose an election commission (Panitia Pemilihan Kabupaten – PPK) was installed, charged with the task of drawing up a list of DPRD candidates for governor Zainal to approve of and to swear in. Based on the size of the electorate in Mentawai it was decided that the newly to be established DPRD should consist of 20 chairs, two of which would customarily be assigned to the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the Indonesian National Police (POLRI). The remaining 18 chairs were to be divided amongst the various political parties. Mentawaians interested in a position within the DPRD needed to affiliate with a political party that was to participate in the local elections on short notice. Political parties had, however, been absent from Mentawai and seemed little inclined to open branch offices in Mentawai. People seeking for party membership thus had to come to Padang to organise this. Their choice for a particular party was almost always based on the possibility to obtain an eligible position on the electoral list rather than on the ideas or ideology of that party.

The PPK had soon drafted a list of candidates based on the Mentawai votes in the DPRD election for the Padang-Pariaman district of July 1999. The chairs were divided as follows: Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan (PDIP) ten chairs, Partai Golongan Karya (Golkar), Partai Demokrasi Kasih Bangsa (PDKB) and TNI/Polri each two chairs. The last four chairs were for Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN), Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP), Partai Demokrasi Indonesia (PDI) and Partai Krisna; one chair each. Zainal, however, was hesitant to approve of the list. His uncertainty was laid in the fact that several political parties started to protest against the composition of the list. Zainal did not really wish to take a stand in this matter because his own political career was based on the support of several of these parties that had voted for his governorship at an earlier stage. As many as 21 political parties, led by PPP and PAN, clustered together in what in the course of time became known as Kelompok 21 (Group 21). Having a different reading of the regional autonomy legislation, Kelompok 21 stated that the composition of the list of candidates was based on an incorrect understanding of the regional autonomy legislation by the PPK. According to Kelompok 21 the composition of the DPRD in Mentawai should be based on the composition of the DPRD in the district from which the DPRD in the new *kabupaten* was to be carved out. Their vision on the division of chairs thus significantly differed from that of the PPK. According to their idea the chairs were to be divided as follows: PAN and PPP four chairs each, Golkar and PDIP three chairs each, TNI/POLRI two chairs and Partai Bulan Bintang (PBB), Partai Keadilan (PK), Partai Persatuan (PP) and Partai Politik Islam Indonesia Masyumi (PPIIM or just Masyumi) one chair each. In either case the constitution of the DPRD in Padang-Pariaman would remain the same, though the occupation of the individual chairs would be subject to change due to the fact that some members would have to transfer to the DPRD in Mentawai. According to the list drafted by the PPK, out

of the 45 members of the DPRD in Padang-Pariaman only four were to be transferred to Mentawai. Among these four were also the only two Mentawaians that already occupied seats in the DPRD Padang-Pariaman, Edison Saleleubaja (PDIP) and Agustinus Sabelegen (PDKB). The other two, Hosrizal and Asril Piliang, both Minangkabau, were like Edison members of the popular PDIP. The other seats in Mentawai as well as the vacant seats in Padang-Pariaman were to be assigned to new members by the respective political parties. But due to the enormous confusion that had ensued after Kelompok 21 had impeached the procedure as well as the legitimacy of the PPK itself, political parties were hesitant or simply not inclined to put forward their candidates. Already at an early stage, Badril saw the onset of lengthy political wrangling. Therefore he called for the political parties not to turn the procedure into a game of interests in which mutual differences would become politicised to such an extent that composing the DPRD would become a mere impossibility. But despite Badril's appeal, Kelompok 21 did not reconsider its stance and what followed was a prolonged period of time filled with protests and intense politicking mainly taking place behind the scenes. During that period Badril did little to put the derailed process back on track.

In February 2000 the newly built DPRD office in Tuapeijat was finished, but the DPRD was not yet ready to move in. The PPK remained to be confronted with political parties, amongst which PAN, PPP and Golkar, unwilling to put forward their candidates. Edison, the intended chairman, and Agustinus, the intended vice-chairman of the DPRD, went to Jakarta to meet with the Minister of Internal Affairs. Apart from discussing the stagnation in the process of forming the DPRD, they were also to review the annual budget (*Anggaran Pendapatan dan Belanja Daerah* – APBD) for 2000 with the minister. According to Agustinus, the APBD 2000 as drafted by Badril, “*sangat tidak masuk akal*” (did not make any sense at all) because it did not accommodate all sections of Mentawai society. Unfortunately, the minister was not in a position to intervene, because according to ministerial instruction, *Instruksi Mendagri* 26/1999, all responsibility for the procedure of Mentawai becoming a *kabupaten* had been transferred to the governor.

What followed was a period in which the process of the formation of the DPRD somewhat faded into the background. The political lobby behind the scenes continued, but was not mediated at length. Finally, on 26 July 2000 the president issued a decree (Keppres 110/2000) that endorsed the accuracy of the method used by the PPK to compile the draft list of candidates for the DPRD. Encouraged by the decree it was decided that by the end of October 2000 the DPRD should be installed. But despite their obvious wrong interpretation of the regional autonomy regulations, PAN and PPP were still not inclined to put forward their candidates. Both TNI and POLRI had also not yet submitted their candidates. Despite the fact that the procedure was legitimate, Hosrizal and Asril Piliang (the two Minangkabau that were on the list for PDIP to be transferred to Mentawai), both not very eager to relocate to Mentawai, started to contest their transfer stating “*Bukan kita tidak mau ke Mentawai, tapi harus jelas prosedurnya*” (It is not that we do not want to go to Mentawai, but the procedure must be clear) (Singgalang 2000b). When it became clear that the inauguration of the DPRD would take place in Pariaman, several of the candidates, among which Maruli Saleleubaja, Yudas, Edison and Yonlifrán, as well as Kurnia

(who was not a candidate) stated that they would be inaugurated in Tuapeijat or else they would refrain from being inaugurated all together. Due to the problems with regard to the inauguration and the fact that the list of candidates was still incomplete, the ceremony was postponed till 25 November 2000. When the inauguration planned on 25 November was cancelled again, several DPRD candidates went to Jakarta in order to enforce their inauguration there. As expected, their request was not granted by Jakarta. This was followed by a wave of protests directed at Zainal, urging him to take his responsibility in the matter. Zainal received various letters urging him to give his approval of the draft list of candidates and various protest actions with the same objective were held in front of his office in Padang. It were mainly YCM, LMAPUS and IPPMEN that organised the protest actions.<sup>141</sup> Especially Kurnia, Edison and Kortanius made sure that their points of view were heard and presented in the media. Kurnia stroke a threatening tone while Kortanius spoke in a more reasoned though utterly sharp manner. When it was suggested that the delay in the issuing of the recommendation letter was caused by the imminent Islamic and Christian holidays, Kortanius stated: "*Jangan nodai hari suci umat Islam dan umat Kristiani dengan kebijakan gubernur*" (don't defile the Islamic and Christian holidays with the policies of the governor). Rather than the holidays, Korta saw the undemocratic "*sikap otoriter yang sangat kental*" (severe authoritarian attitude) of the governor as the main reason for the delay in the issuing of the recommendation letter. Kortanius furthermore mocked Zainal by stating that while it seemed impossible to simply install a DPRD, it would probably take a very long time before they could start talking about more serious issues such as the details of regional autonomy (Padang Express, November 2000). Apart from ventilating their displeasure about the lack in decisive action of Zainal, they also accused the political parties of incomprehensible behaviour. At first there were only eight political parties willing to open branch offices in Mentawai and all of a sudden no less than 21 political parties felt they had to intervene in the procedure of composing the DPRD in Mentawai.

On 7 December 2000 Zainal finally approved of the list of candidates, which was however still incomplete due to the fact that the four seats reserved for PAN, PPP, TNI and POLRI were still not claimed by the respective parties. On the contrary, Zainal's approval of the draft list had triggered a reaction from Kelompok 21 stating that they would take the issue to Jakarta for reviewing by the president himself would Zainal push through inaugurating the candidates on the incomplete list. Zainal, however, did push through and on 16 December 2000 he inaugurated the 16 candidates that were on the list. Ten out of these 16 candidates were originating from Mentawai, nine of which were autochthonous Mentawaians while one was a Batak immigrant who had lived on Mentawai for a long time.

<sup>141</sup> Lembaga Masyarakat Adat Pagai Utara dan Selatan (LMAPUS) is chaired by Kurnia Sakerebau. In the chaotic period after Mentawai became independent from Padang-Pariaman this organisation was suddenly there. Kurnia, a secondary school teacher in Sikakap, made his presence felt by being extremely vocal in the media. Kurnia was very critical during the installing of the DPRD and severely criticised the performance of the interim bupati. At the same time Kurnia was said to be negotiating with Badril about a banana plantation on the Pagai Islands.

Due to the fact that there were still four members missing, the DPRD was not able to appoint a chairman from their midst and to form the various commissions within the DPRD charged with specific areas of government. By not putting forward their candidates, PAN, PPP and TNI/POLRI managed to obstruct the process for another three months. When in March 2001 the four remaining chairs were still not claimed, the case was taken to court. The court was quick in deciding that the whole process had been completed in accordance with the regulations and that PAN, PPP and TNI/POLRI should put forward their candidates immediately.

Finally, on 7 April 2001, Zainal inaugurated Edison Saleleubaja (PDI-P) as chairman of the DPRD. Agustinus Sabelegen (PDKB) and Lakri Amin (Golkar) were both installed as vice-chairman. Yonli Fran Siritoitet was appointed chairman of the so-called commission A (responsible for government and administration). Maralus Sinurat became chairman of commission B (development) and Yudas Sabaggalet became chairman of commission C (finances). The PDI-P fraction was chaired by San Andi Iklas Samaloisa, the PDKB was chaired by Yudas Sabaggalet, the Nationalists parties Krisna and PDI became chaired by Hasurungan Hutagaol and Raymundus Sababalat became Golkar's chairman. Apart from making a programme of work for the year 2001 that had already entered its second quarter, one of the most pressing tasks of the DPRD was to elect the permanent *bupati*.

### Electing the first *bupati*

As soon as the DPRD was finally installed, negotiations over the election of district head began. From June 2001 onwards people could enlist themselves as candidates for *bupati*. It was planned that the DPRD would vote for the *bupati* on 2 July 2001 and that the elected *bupati* would be installed on 15 July 2001. After only little time a list of twenty candidates circulated with the election commission.<sup>142</sup> Some of the candidates were put forward by their respective political parties. Others had enlisted on their own initiative. Half of the people on the list was of non-Mentawaiian origin. This again triggered a heated discussion about the origin of the first *bupati*. Especially the Mentawaians that had been vocal during the last few years again vigorously defended their idea that the *bupati* should be one of them, a *putra asli daerah*, a Mentawaiian and preferably a Christian. The idea of being ruled again by an outsider was so repulsive to some that they simply could not accept non-Mentawaians opting for the position of *bupati*. Rumours were circulating that some of the non-Mentawaiian candidates on the list had received intimidating messages advising them to withdraw from candidacy. Mentawaiian candidates were, however, also threatened frequently. By the end of June 2001 the governmental ferry Aloy was summoned to return back to Padang shortly after it left for Tuapeijat. Edison Saleleubaja,

<sup>142</sup> Edison Saleleubaja, Yonli Fran Siritoitet, Kurnia Sakerebau, Oreste Sakeru, Antonius Samongilailai, Kortanius Sabeleake, Parmen Sabolak, San Andi Iklas Samaloisa, Ridwan Siritubui, Asril, Suhendi, Nurdin, Alexander Lukman, Maralus, Hendri Nasraoni, Tasnimi Raza, Ade Waldemar, Yusril, Astarmizi and Maruli Saleleubaja were on the list of candidates.

on the ferry, was informed on his mobile phone that there was a bomb on the ferry that had three candidates for the position of *bupati* and their prospective vices amongst its passengers. The candidates were on their way to Tuapeijat in order to present their vision and mission statements to the DPRD in Mentawai. People took the threat serious and requested the Aloy to return to Padang. The Aloy did return to Padang where no bombs were found. The case was reported to the police, but the person who called in the bomb threat was never found.

Eventually three elect worthy candidates were distilled from the initial list. PDI-P had put Edison Saleleubaja forward. PDKB choose Alexander Lukman, an ethnic Chinese with a Catholic background. Alexander was eager to take up the position of district head. He had far-reaching ideas about opening his own logging company on the islands. He had an elaborated political and economic plan written even before he was officially listed as a candidate for the position of district head. By contrast, Edison did not seem that eager for the position. Many of his influential friends – some of them involved in the logging sector - from Jakarta, however, thought it very convenient to have a friend occupying the influential position of district head. Apart from Edison and Alexander there was a third serious candidate for the position of district head: former interim *bupati* Antonius Samongilailai. Together with his equally Muslim running mate, Ridwan Siritubui, originating from Simalegi (North Siberut), they formed the Islamic pole in the elections. They could count on the votes from Golkar and the smaller Islamic parties in the DPRD. Now members of the DPRD were frequently harassed from different directions in order to make sure that they would vote for the person perceived as the most suitable candidate. The common Mentawaians were not in any sense part of these political processes. The election of the *bupati* was a task solely in the hands of the DPRD and therefore negotiations were mainly taking place behind the scenes. The wider public was simply left out of the picture and never consulted for their opinion. When Puailiggoubat started publishing in April 2001, the public could at least read what was decided for them. In an interview with Yudas Sabaggalet, I asked him about his thoughts with regard to the political game played solely by the Mentawaiian elite. He then advocated the voice of local NGOs to be heard by the DPRD, whereas they acted as a sort of “*DPRD di luar gedung*”, a local parliament outside the (official) building. Whereas in theory it might be true that NGOs are speaking on behalf of wider society, this is not necessarily the case. In the previous chapter I have explained that local organisations stand at considerable distance from their constituencies. In addition, more than half of the members of the DPRD originated from, or still had strong ties with local NGOs.

In a close finish between Antonius Samongilailai and Edison Saleleubaja after two rounds of voting, the latter was finally elected as the first *bupati* of Kabupaten Kepulauan Mentawai. After the first round, votes for both candidates were equal. The story goes that Rp 1.3 billion (€130.000) was spent to buy the crucial vote in Edison’s advantage. It was never known who bought the vote from whom. Antonius’ supporters, convinced of an unfair procedure, opted for a third round of voting. When their request was turned down, a group of angry (and probably paid) people went for Tuapeijat where they burned down the DPRD building under construction. This action did not meet with any reprisals initially,

The burned down  
DPRD office under  
construction



but in July 2002, three people were convicted for their alleged involvement in the burning of the DPRD building. One was sentenced to four years imprisonment for financing transportation and food for the people that eventually started the fire. Two others were sentenced to two and a half years imprisonment for their managing of the group of arsonists (Puailiggoubat 2002h).

According to planning Edison was to be inaugurated as soon as possible after the final voting, but he was finally installed in November 2001. It was only then that the *bupati* could start with the setting up of the local government departments, appointing the various heads of these departments and start procedures to hire personnel within the civil service.

### The KAM case

Regional autonomy had lifted the ban on logging on Siberut, as a result of which the island's remaining forests became an important part of the politicking that was going on. Only few months after the new *kabupaten* became official, eleven concessions for logging and oil palm plantations were proposed over an area of 274,500 ha (covering 68% of the total landmass on Siberut) (PASIH 2009). The substantive delay in the instalment of the DPRD and the election of the *bupati* provided the provincial and central authorities the

time and opportunity to finalise the procedures through which a large logging concessions located on southeast Siberut would become operational.

As part of seriously diminishing governmental expenditures, higher education institutions in Indonesia have to cope with increasing financial independency since 1999. Since 1999 Islamic schools, universities and other higher education institutions were given the opportunity to apply for a so-called Land Grant College (LGC) (*cf.* DTE 2000a).<sup>143</sup> Those institutions granted with a LGC are responsible for the supervision of a certain area and are able to subject the area to scientific research and other income generating activities. The majority of the areas at disposal for the LGCs are so called *lahan kritis* (critical terrain), almost always indicating that these areas have been logged over and should thus be replanted on short notice in order not to deplete further. In theory the LGC scheme thus offers a clever combination of initial rehabilitation of severely disturbed ecosystems eventually leading to ecologically sound commercial exploitation (DTE 2000a).

Not long after the introduction of the concept, the governmental university in Padang, Universitas Andalas (Unand), was offered 40,000 hectares in *kabupaten* Sawahlunto Sinjunjung on the Sumatran mainland by the Ministry of Forestry (Padang Ekspres 1999). Initially Unand was reluctant in receiving this area as their LGC, trying to make the ministry believe that they were not yet fully prepared to manage a LGC. Shortly afterwards Unand was offered a part of the former MPLC concession area on the Pagai Islands, which they also refused (Departemen Kehutanan dan Perkebunan 1999). Only in a later stadium it became fully clear why they had been lingering accepting either of the LGCs. Instead of accepting one of the proposed LGCs – both consisting of logged-over areas – Unand was much more eager to obtain an area on Siberut where large parts of the tropical lowland rain forest were still standing. An area of 49,650 hectares reaching from Siberut's south coast to halfway north Siberut immediately adjacent to the island's national park was eventually granted to Unand under the banner of a LGC. For Unand it has obviously been clear from the very beginning of the negotiations that they were going to generate fast cash through logging activities.

In the meantime Muslimin Nasution's successor, Nurmachmudi Ismail, had introduced a couple of new laws with regard to forestry. Among other things it was no longer allowed to extract timber without the intervention of a locally based intermediary – a so called *koperasi* (cooperation) – responsible for the negotiations between the timber company and the local communities living in the particular areas. Nurmachmudi Ismail also introduced the possibility to transform already issued LGCs into so-called HPHAs.<sup>144</sup> Further all applications for HPHA logging concession should be issued with an environmental impact assessment (*Analisis Dampak Lingkungan* - ANDAL).<sup>145</sup> Unand, quick in understanding this, almost instantly developed its own logging cooperative,

<sup>143</sup> The LGC scheme is an idea that came out of the hat of former Minister of Forestry, Muslimin Nasution.

<sup>144</sup> HPHA (*Hak Pengusahaan Hutan Alam*) is a commercial logging permit with the intention to apply selective logging and replant the area under HPHA in order to create sustainable production forests.

<sup>145</sup> ANDAL (*Analisis Dampak Lingkungan*) is an environmental impact analysis report.

Koperasi Andalas Mandani (KAM), headed by Unand's rector, Prof. Dr. Marlis Rachman. An environmental impact assessment for a HPHA logging concession for the area under Unand's LGC was submitted to the Ministry of Forestry in Jakarta almost instantly. Although the provincial ANDAL commission issued a negative environmental impact assessment (3 June 2000), on 21 August 2000 the Ministry of Forestry issued a letter in which they announced their agreement with the ANDAL sent to them by Unand in an earlier stage (DTE 2001). Without an official recommendation by the local government (Badril had refused to sign this recommendation), the Ministry of Forestry issued a permit for Unand's HPHA on 15 March 2001. By then KAM had already made an agreement with the Jakarta-based timber company PT Sinar Minang Sejahtera and in theory they were ready to operate. The last thing they had to do was to 'socialise' (*disosialisasikan*) their plans to the local communities on Siberut.

The news about the LGC being transformed into a logging concession triggered a wave of protest. Seven local organisations, among which Yayasan Citra Mandiri (YCM), Yayasan Suku Mentawai (YASUMI), Forum Komunikasi Masyarakat Mentawai (FKMM), Yayasan Uma Mentawai (UMANTA), Yayasan Laggai Simaeru (YLS), Himpunan Pengkajian dan Pengawasan Pembangunan Mentawai (HP3M) and Gerakan Mahasiswa Mentawai (GMM) got themselves involved in a letter campaign directed at all parties involved including the press (Puailiggoubat 2001).<sup>146</sup> Their protests concentrated around the fact that the transformation of the initial LGC into a HPHA was misleading and not according to law UUPK (41/1999) on forestry in which LGC was never mentioned as a potential means through which Indonesia's forests can be exploited. They also referred to the fact that the provincial ANDAL commission had never issued a recommendation for this concession. On the contrary, they had issued a negative environmental impact assessment, which was obviously bypassed by the Ministry of Forestry. Local government had never been properly informed and had never issued recommendations and thus could the KAM case be seen as a serious violation of the autonomy of the district (Anonymous 2001).

With the help of UNESCO and AMA-PM, YCM started to instruct local communities in Rereiket not to comply with the promises they were about to be offered by Unand. When KAM, with the help of a bribed local and a lecturer in anthropology familiar with Siberut, went to Rereiket in order to seek the approval of local communities there, local communities – with the lessons by YCM still fresh in mind – chased away the *sosialisasi* team (Puailiggoubat 2001). The initial plan was for the team to go around in the Rereiket area, but when confronted with the unexpectedly hostile locals they left the area immediately. However, the above mentioned bribed local originating from Saibi Samukop had been conducting some private investigations. He had found out that at least four clans in his home area were eager to hand over their lands to a logging company. With the help of several individual members of the four clans inclined to cooperate with the logging company and PT Sindo, a concessionaire holding a small IPK logging concession on

<sup>146</sup> GMM was established especially for this occasion.

Siberut's east coast, KAM started the building of a base camp and a log pond in Subelen.<sup>147</sup> The problem KAM faced consisted of the fact that their concession area was located land inwards. Logs thus had to be transported to the east coast over lands that were not included in the concession area. Permission for transportation of logs over these lands had to be obtained from those clans owning the lands and the vegetation growing on it. On a rainy day in May 2001 KAM decided to come to the field to settle things with the local communities in this area and so the local population in Saibi Muara was confronted with a helicopter landing in their village. After the helicopter had been investigating the surroundings it finally landed on the football-field in the middle of the village. Local communities were subjected to a round of *sosialisasi*, but matters were not discussed profoundly whereas after only fifteen minutes of heavy rain the classroom of the local school where the gathering took place became flooded. KAM left the field without a clear outcome of the negotiations (Puailiggoubat 2001).

An informant residing in Muara Siberut informed YCM about the helicopter coming to Siberut and YCM instigated a team to leave for Siberut in order to find out what was going on. The team gathered in Saibi Muara instructing local communities not to cooperate with KAM. The next day local communities were called to the base camp in Subelen located some 15 kilometres north of Saibi Muara, where KAM had just begun the unloading of some heavy machinery. When in the course of the day it became clear that their request to return the heavy machinery back to the mainland was not taken serious, the atmosphere became agitated. Residents from Saibi Muara got into a dispute with locals from Subelen and not long after that the base camp went up in flames (Kompas 2001). A couple of days later local communities were confronted with the police brought in from the mainland. The police was diligently searching for the *provokator* (provocative force) behind the burning of the base camp, but local communities had closed the ranks and pretended to know nothing. Some 45 youngsters from Saibi were subsequently brought to the police office in Muara Sikabalan for further interrogation, but they stuck to their initial story, telling the police that they burned the base camp together and on their own initiative (Mimbar Minang 2001a). They never mention anybody's name in particular and some decelerated the investigations even further by pretending not to speak Bahasa Indonesia. Some members of the team instigated by YCM went into hiding for a couple of weeks after the burning of the base camp. YCM's director Kortanius Sabeleake later told me that a special police force came to the office several times searching for evidence and one of their employees. The heated atmosphere slowly died away after the police was convinced that the person they were searching for was already for weeks on a fieldtrip to Kalimantan and no other evidence was to be found. Eventually no one was arrested. A week after the burning of the base camp, several NGOs in Padang decided to search for sympathisers amongst students of Unand through the organisation of a demonstration at the campus. Some dozens of scholars and students answered the call for a solidarity demonstration. Armed with pickets and banners calling for the immediate withdrawal of Unand from Siberut, they eventually forced deputy rector Dr. Ir. Musliar Kasim, KAM's

<sup>147</sup> IPK (*Izin Pemanfaatan Kayu*) is a small-scale logging permit allowing the concessionaire to extract timber and non-timber forest product from the area under concession.

Loading logs from the  
KAM concession for  
international transport



deputy chairman, out of his office. In a heated dialogue between Musliar Kasim and HP3M's spokesman, Marwin Siritubui, opinions of both parties were presented, but consensus was never reached. Musliar Kasim turned down the protest by announcing a meeting to take place on 2 June 2001 at Unand (Mimbar Minang 2001b). All parties with a maximum of 40 people were invited to further discuss matters. At this meeting where governor Zainal Bakar and Badril Bakar's replacement, Antonius Samongilailai were also present, Musliar Kasim doubted the representativeness of the mainly NGO people present. After all several local communities in the Saibi-Subelen area had come to terms with KAM (Tempo 2001). Moreover, interim *bupati* Antonius had in the meantime approved of the HPHA concession in his district. The opponents of the HPHA concession, infuriated by the *fait accompli* they were presented with, left the meeting in a dark mood.

During the following days various similar demonstrations in front of various provincial offices were organized. Local communities had also been called to Padang in order to attend the demonstrations. Among others they offered protest statements signed by local communities on Siberut to the governor of West Sumatra, the local as well as the provincial forestry department and their *bupati*. Although the crowds gathered were

rather impressive, both regional and provincial officials dismissed the claims made by the protesters suggesting that the majority of them were mobilized only because of the prospect of a free meal without actually knowing what they were protesting for or against.<sup>148</sup> With their numbers questioned, opponents of KAM became marginalised.

Despite ongoing protests and severe conflicts between and within local communities on Siberut, KAM started logging in September 2001. Although the HPHA concession had a duration of 25 years, KAM was active on Siberut for seven years only. As a result of internal problems, disappointing results, continuous opposition from conservation activists and especially the tremendously difficult relationship with local communities KAM withdrew from the field in 2007. Severe environmental damage was, however, done and conflicts between and within clans had long-term damaged relations within and between clans.

### Building a bureaucracy

As soon as Mentawai became an independent district in 1999 a completely new bureaucracy had to be built. Parts of the Padang-Pariaman bureaucracy relating to Mentawai were, however, integrally transferred to the new district government of the archipelago, eventually to be located in Tuapeijat. Already in February 2000, 24 civil servants formerly active in the lower and middle echelons of the Padang-Pariaman bureaucracy resigned. These Minangkabau civil servants were transferred to the Mentawaian bureaucracy against their will. According to their own statement they were not willing to transfer to Mentawai. Various reactions appeared in the media. Provincial government stated that this was a shameful action, but did nothing to oblige these people to take their responsibilities. Kortanius Sabeleake spoke of a conspiracy that should lead to the failure of the new *kabupaten* because of crashing government machinery, after which it could easily be reincorporated within the Padang-Pariaman district. Kurnia Sakerebau saw proof of the fact that outsiders were not capable of governing Mentawai. According to Kurnia the vacant positions could only be filled with Mentawaians. Neither provincial government nor that of Padang-Pariaman took the responsibility to fill the positions. Whereas the DPRD Mentawai was not installed yet, the positions remained vacant for quite some time.

During the interim term of Badril Bakar, a start was made with the construction of the various governmental offices in Tuapeijat. As soon as office buildings were finished, the designated department was to transfer from the interim office in Padang to Tuapeijat. While some did transfer, others only partly transferred and again others remained to operate from the offices in Padang. Civil servants often had no idea about where they were supposed to go, often leading to empty offices. Until September 2000, when

<sup>148</sup> Organisers of protest gatherings indeed sometimes lured people into these gatherings by 'paying' them for their presence with a wrapped meal (*nasi bungkus*). This handing out of wrapped meals has led to *protes nasi bungkus* becoming an equivalent for gatherings attended by people paid for their presence but who might otherwise be oblivious of the nature or goal of the gathering itself.

administrative papers were finally transferred from Pariaman to Mentawai, there was an extremely chaotic situation. Nobody really knew which office was located where, whether or not it was active and whether or not it was staffed.

## The formation of the lower administrative levels

Before the introduction of the village structure in 1979 Mentawai was part of the province of West Sumatra and the *kabupaten* Padang-Pariaman. The archipelago was then divided in four *kecamatan* (sub-districts): North Siberut, South Siberut, Sipora, and the Pagai Islands. Since its independence, the Mentawai Archipelago has, like many other regions in Indonesia, been subject to a process of *pemekaran* (literally: blossoming, hinting at administrative fragmentation), re-dividing the archipelago from four *kecamatan* (sub-districts) into ten *kecamatan* nowadays (Pagai Selatan, Sikakap, Pagai Utara, Sipora Selatan, Sipora Utara, Siberut Selatan, Siberut Barat Daya, Siberut Tengah, Siberut Utara, Siberut Barat). Despite the fact that the plan for this *pemekaran* was already discussed for the first time in 2000 it was only in February 2013 that the ten *kecamatan* became official. Outsiders have been critical of this *pemekaran*, categorising it as unnecessary and too expensive for such a small, relatively sparsely populated archipelago. While basically everything else was contested in Mentawai, this *pemekaran* was an operation that was supported by the majority. Many Mentawaians saw the *pemekaran* as a development potential. The new sub-districts offered job opportunities in various sectors and were therefore introduced without causing a lot of fuss. Such was different for the proposal that was to change the lowest bureaucratic structure, that of the village.

Until 1985 a typical Minangkabau form of government, the so-called *nagari*, has been operative underneath the level of the *kecamatan*. Different from the situation in the rest of West Sumatra, every *kecamatan* in Mentawai had only one *nagari*, with only one *wali nagari* (head of the *nagari*) directly under the responsibility of the *camat* (head of the *kecamatan*). Underneath the *wali nagari* functioned the various *kepala kampung* (head of the settlement) (Persoon 1994: 227). In 1979, the Indonesian government – in an attempt to create uniformity in the abundant variety of local forms of government – issued a law on village government. For West Sumatra this meant that the *nagari* structure was abolished and transformed into a *desa* (village) structure. Where elsewhere in West Sumatra the *nagari* had to be divided in smaller units that became *desa*, in Mentawai the level of the *nagari* simply disappeared while a considerable number of smaller social units – regardless of their mutual social and historical relations – were united within one *desa*. For West Sumatra the introduction of the village law meant that a lot of traditional leaders lost their position and gradually also their credibility because their authority no longer fitted in the new context of legitimate leadership. For Mentawai it meant that various autonomous *uma* were clustered together underneath a new form of hierarchical leadership that never existed before in the egalitarian Mentawaiian society.

With the introduction of regional autonomy, mainland West Sumatra felt that it should get rid of the *desa* structure as soon as possible for they felt that the imposition of the *desa*

structure had not worked well in West Sumatra because it was not in accordance with their socio-cultural system (Von Benda-Beckmann & Von Benda-Beckmann 2001). The province of West Sumatra decided to reintroduce the local government structure of the *nagari*. Mentawai feared that it, being part of the province of West Sumatra, would also become subject to this 'return to the *nagari*.' While West Sumatra waited for additional legislation from the provincial level, several Mentawai NGOs had in the meantime introduced the idea that Mentawai should have its own movement: *kembali ke laggai* (return to the *laggai*, in this context to be translated as settlement) (Eindhoven 2003).

### ***From a land tenure system to a political structure***

Provincial regulation No. 9/2000 effected a long process of negotiations about whether and how West Sumatra should reintroduce the *nagari*. In section 24 of this same legislation it was explained that the province of West Sumatra as a whole would be subject to the return to the *nagari*, except for the Mentawai Archipelago. Because of the significantly different *adat* and culture of the Mentawaians they were given the opportunity to construct their own regulations with regard to the restructuring of the local government (Von Benda-Beckmann & Von Benda-Beckmann 2001). This recommendation as it was put into words in this section 24 was one of the first times in which the different status of the Mentawaians was ventilated in neutral – that means not negative – terms and was understood as a public acknowledgement of the different though equal status of the Mentawaians within the province of West Sumatra.

Following the issuing of regulation 9/2000, an advisory team of 23 people consisting of civil servants, intellectuals, academics, and several Mentawaians was called to life. This team had to look into the wishes of the local communities and was also responsible for draft versions of legislations that would eventually lead to a return to the *laggai* (settlement). Local NGO Yayasan Citra Mandiri (YCM), known as the architect of the '*kembali ke laggai*' idea, facilitated five meetings with local communities in the first three months of 2001. These meetings were successively held in Sikakap (North Pagai), Sioban (Sipora), Madobak (south Siberut), Muara Siberut (south Siberut), and Muara Sikabalan (north Siberut) (Eindhoven 2003).

While the return to the *laggai* was initially considered the ultimate opportunity to differentiate the Mentawaians from the mainland Minangkabau, it soon became clear that a return to the *laggai* was not as simple as it had seen beforehand. As explained in chapter two of this thesis, settlements on the southern Mentawai Islands have a different history than settlements on Siberut. The first people to come to Siberut simply claimed a piece of land as being theirs by planting something. All members of one clan (*uma*) lived together in a settlement they called *puumaijat*. A *puumaijat* consisted of one big longhouse surrounded by gardens and various smaller constructions – everything located on the ancestral land (*porak punuteteu*) that was handed down from one generation to the next. When the population started to grow people started to disperse all over the archipelago settling on land still empty. There came an end to this process when all the land in the archipelago had an owner and there was no unoccupied land available anymore. This led to new a situation: that of people living on and making use of land

without owning it. With these new settlement patterns the word *pulaggaijat* came into use on Siberut.<sup>149</sup> *Pulaggaijat* was used to indicate an area where more than one *puumaijat* had its residencies, some owning the land, others loaning it. The *puumaijat* knew no explicit political leaders. Such was also the case in the *pulaggaijat* where people mutually respect the internal autonomy of the different *puumaijat* with which they had to live in the same area.

The word *laggai* has various meanings on Siberut. In the area around the river Saibi, the word *laggai* means as much as 'stone'. In the northern parts of Siberut *laggai* refers to testicles. Of course the advisory team caused some cheerful excitement when they tried to inform the public in Muara Sikabalan of their plan to return to the *laggai*. The word *laggai* as it was understood and used by the advisory team, originates from the southern Mentawai Islands where it was indeed used to indicate a settlement with a village-like structure where members of different clans may live together. Fact remains that the *laggai* and all derivatives thereof refer to a land tenure system that never had any political or bureaucratic powers attached to it.

After the first consultations with the public, the advisory team realised that a return to the *laggai* would not be as easy as they had expected it to be. The advisory team itself was not unanimous and therefore not clear about whether the *laggai* system should be composed on the basis of the initial stretches of ancestral land (*porak punuteteu*), or on the territory of the village. When based on the initial territory of the different *porak punuteteu*, the *sibakkat laggai* (initial settlers) would probably absorb all political power within that area. It was even feared that those people with no historical rights to the land they were living on could even be expelled from the area. In other instances initial settlers do no longer live on their ancestral lands, but still assert certain rights over these lands. This meant that, when based on the division of ancestral lands, the *laggai* could become governed by people not even present within the *laggai*.

Somewhere in the discussions about the return to the *laggai*, some people started to take the 'return' literally, promoting that all Mentawaians had to return to their initial *laggai* (i.e. their ancestral land). Despite the fact that this idea probably started as joke, a fuss broke out amongst less directly informed communities in the interiors of Siberut, depending on news stripped from details and context trickling down to their settlements. Almost unable to curb the tumult they had unleashed among the general public, the advisory team eventually decided that the *laggai* was to be based upon the territory of the *desa*. That decision solved their problems partially. Time and again the team found itself in heated debates about the terminology used. Apart from the discussion of the meaning of the word *laggai* itself, there was also disagreement about the terminology proposed for the various bureaucratic positions within the *laggai*. During *sosialisasi* (socialisation) of the third draft version (which was considered final) of the legislation on the *laggai*, many misunderstandings popped up with regard to the terminology used. After thorough

<sup>149</sup> On the southern Mentawai islands the word *pulaggaijat* refers to a deserted settlement.

change of the terminology, another draft was presented to the public in July 2002 (Puailiggoubat 2002a; SDKKM 2002a). But the terminology in this draft, however, caused even more confusion than that used in the previous one. It was then decided that the text drafted earlier in 2002 would be used in the final proposal for the return to the *laggai*. The final proposal suggested a simple hierarchical bureaucracy, based on the bureaucratic structure of the *desa*. The position of the *kepala desa* (village head) was replaced by the *sikebbukat laggai*.<sup>150</sup> The *sikebbukat laggai* was to be elected by the entire community living in the *laggai*.<sup>151</sup> The *sikebbukat laggai* would be assisted by the secretary of the *laggai* (*sekretaris laggai*), the former *sekretaris desa*. The community would also be responsible for the election of the *pusaraat punutubut laggai*, a legislative assembly consisting of *kepala suku* (clan elders), comparable to the village parliament, *badan permusyawaratan desa* (BPD) or *dewan perwakilan desa* (DPD). The last component of the *laggai* consisted of a board responsible for security and order within the *laggai*, called *sipatalaga*.<sup>152</sup> The *sipatalaga* was to be composed of *adat* specialists, authorities in the field of religion, clan elders and other organisations possibly present within the *laggai*.<sup>153</sup> The function of the *sipatalaga* is similar to that of the *lembaga ketahanan masyarakat desa* (LKMD), a village organisation that makes sure that the aspirations and initiatives of the villagers are heard and supported. The LKMD also cares for the rights and duties of all villagers to be guaranteed. The tasks and positions within the *laggai* are strikingly similar to that of the village. Therefore the return to the *laggai* was often understood as a process in which people only changed clothes (*ganti baju*).

Eventually *bupati* Edison, who actually never showed any real interest in the matter, decided that the return to the *laggai* was too complicated, basically impossible to explain to outsiders and triggering too much unrest and uncertainty within the archipelago.<sup>154</sup> As if the advisory team had not went to a painstaking and lengthy process that had taken them more than two years, Edison suddenly decided that there would be no such thing as a return to the *laggai*. The *desa* was to remain the *desa* and that was the end of it.

<sup>150</sup> *Sikebbukat* is understood as an elderly person. *Sikebbukat uma* is thus an elderly member of the clan (Tulius 2012). *Sikebbukat laggai* is a word probably invented by the advisory team. People on Siberut as well as on the southern Mentawai Islands were unable to give a clear understanding of whom should be indicated by this term (personal communication with Tulius 2010).

<sup>151</sup> It was explicitly mentioned that *all* – that means also the newcomers – people living within the *laggai* are entitled to vote for the *sikebbukat laggai*.

<sup>152</sup> In difficult disputes over land, Mentawaians often seek for an independent third party, a facilitator (*sipatalaga*). The *sipatalaga* is responsible for the transmission of claims and defences among all parties involved until a solution is found. The *sipatalaga* has no decisive power (Tulius 2012).

<sup>153</sup> In this context one could think of local organisations or *kelompok pemuda* (semi-organised groups of young people).

<sup>154</sup> Local NGOs more than once discredited the *bupati* as well as the DPRD for the fact that they showed little to no interest in the return to the *laggai*.

## Conclusion

The lobby for a political and bureaucratic independent archipelago had already started during the late 1990s. This call for separation came from a relatively small group of educated, ethnically conscious and politically engaged Mentawaians who were furthermore displeased about the exploitation of the Mentawai Archipelago by outsiders. The lobby for more involvement in local politics and bureaucracy concentrated on officials at the national level as well as at the provincial level. The fact that Mentawai, as a result of an unexpected effect of the decentralisation processes that were introduced after the fall of the *Orde Baru* regime, was granted independency so early in the era of *Reformasi*, probably had everything to do with the intensive lobby that preceded it.

The interim period that followed was characterised by intrigues and political scheming. While the province was responsible for the transition to self-government of the newly carved out *kabupaten*, the governor himself was not particularly inclined to contribute to a smooth transitory period. The Mentawaians earlier involved in the lobby for independency were disappointed about the developments taking place. Especially the appointment of the two consecutive interim *bupati* was a thorn in their eye. Their protests and persistent demand for a *putra asli daerah* made it fairly impossible for the interim *bupati* to actually perform the tasks the governor had charged them with. Namely the establishment of the local parliament (DPRD). Political parties continuously questioned the candidate list and legislation about the process as well as the question of whom actually being responsible for what remained unclear. Party interests and the personal interests of the governor seemed to play an important role in the delay of the establishment of the DPRD.

Whereas it took so long for the DPRD to be established and inaugurated, their main task, the election of a *bupati* also suffered from delay. Apart from the delay, the election process itself was also lengthy and characterised by party politics, personal interests, bribery and ethnic as well as religious favouritism. During all this politicking a questionable HPHA logging concession was issued for Siberut. This concession in the hands of the Padang-based university Andalas became operative in September 2001 caused severe environmental and social damage.

Common people were not part of all this politicking that mainly took place in Padang. The fact that they were not part of the political process did, however, not mean that common people were not affected by it. Because it took the people responsible such a long time to establish the DPRD and to elect a *bupati*, the establishment of the public administration came to a standstill. While former bureaucrats (many of them Minangkabau) refused to physically transfer to Mentawai and their replacements were not appointed yet, the local bureaucracy was basically non-existent during the first few years of regional autonomy in Mentawai. Despite the fact that a start was made with the construction of governmental buildings and offices in Tuapeijat, these offices remained empty until Edison finally started the application procedures for jobs within the civil service. Here again, no one seemed inclined to take responsibility for the correct handling of the procedures.

While higher levels of politics and governance were not established yet, the fear of being incorporated within the mainland 'return to the *nagari*' movement triggered a local demand for a 'return to the *laggai*'. Whereas the elite mainly busied itself with the orchestration of the political realm at the level of the *kabupaten*, they showed little interest in this proposal for the organisation of the lower levels of administration (e.g. the *kecamatan* (sub-district) and the village). The possible 'return to the *laggai*' caused a lot of social unrest and simultaneously caused the elite to be suspected of disinterest for the aspirations of the people.

These developments, together with the fact that common people had never been part of the lobby for independence and the politicking that ensued after regional autonomy had been introduced, certainly widened the already existing gap between the local elite and the common Mentawaian.



PENCANTAN KASIMAE  
KASIMAE  
PROPER  
MUSARA KASIMAE  
PENERANGAN  
LOKASI  
MUSARA KASIMAE  
WAKTU PENERANGAN  
PELAKSANA  
KONSULTAS PENER



SATOKO  
Mentawai  
(SIBERUT SELATAN, SIBERUT BARAT DAYA)

