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Products and producers of social and political change: elite activism and politicking in the Mentawai Archipelago, Indonesia
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Citation

Eindhoven, M. (2019, May 16). *Products and producers of social and political change: elite activism and politicking in the Mentawai Archipelago, Indonesia*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/73421>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



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Issue Date: 2019-05-16

Epilogue

Today we are able to look back at nearly twenty years of political and bureaucratic independency of the Mentawai Archipelago. This thesis has handled the first, most hectic years of regional autonomy and decentralisation and the conclusions I have drawn in the last chapter are based on observations I made during intensive field research during those years. The larger part of the past twenty years is, however, not part of the descriptive parts and analysis of this thesis. While many believe that the first years of *Reformasi* are by far the most interesting, I believe that the politicking as it is taking place in the Mentawai Archipelago today is as intriguing as it was two decades ago. In this epilogue I wish to take a look at the current state of politics and governance and the developments that ensue from it. This epilogue simultaneously serves as a check whether or not the conclusions I have drawn earlier are eligible for refinement.

Currently, Yudas Sabaggalet acts as *bupati* for the Mentawai district. In the elections of 2017, Yudas Sabaggalet was elected as *bupati* for a second term. This time he coupled up with Kortanius Sabeleake as his vice, while during his first term (2011-2016) Yudas was coupled with Rijel Samaloisa. Rijel, however, did not want to couple up with Yudas for a second term, because he was displeased about the extent to which Yudas allowed himself to be influenced by personal and outsider interests. Unlike Edison who was keen to minimize the interference of the Minangkabau and Islam, Judas is much more focused on economic development in which everyone can participate, also as Minangkabau or Muslim. Unlike Edison who was keen to minimize the interference of the Minangkabau and Islam, Judas is much more focused on large-scale economic development in which everyone regardless of their background and religion is welcome to participate. In view of the developments in the archipelago so far, Mentawai has changed from a backward region into a region that is full of opportunities. Yudas' more inclusive approach has led to a considerable increase in the numbers of migrants to Mentawai. Many Niassans, but even more Minangkabau have taken the leap to the islands, bringing their own culture and religion with them. When I visited Mentawai in 2014 it became clear to me that these migrants, with their predominantly Islamic signature, put a clear stamp on daily life in the archipelago. Mosques are sprouting and the call for prayer five times a day is now common rather than exceptional in almost every village. Yudas, being receptive to political interference from the mainland, gave the provincial government permission to build an extensive Islamic centre in the village of Maileppet, immediately after his inauguration

in 2011. Yudas then also appointed Ildil Gusti, a Moslem Minangkabau and known vassal of the governor, as the district's new secretary. Both requests were earlier submitted to Edison Saleleubaja during his second term (2006-2010) as *bupati*, but Edison never gave in to these requests from the mainland leading to a further deterioration of the relationship with the mainland that was already not too good at that time.

Different from the two previous direct local elections (*pemilihan kepala daerah – pilkada*) in 2006 and 2011, the *pilkada* of 2017 was entrenched with party politics from Jakarta. In view of the upcoming presidential elections (*pilihan presiden – pilpres*) in 2019, political parties in Jakarta interfered with the nomination of candidates for the *pilkada* 2017. Political parties wanted to make sure that they could count on the support from the regions for their presidential candidate and therefore interfered with the local elections. Party chairmen at the regional level had to come to an agreement with their headquarters in order to get their candidates for the *pilkada* approved of. At the time of the local elections in 2017 the PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia Perjuangan) as well as Partai Golkar had four seats within local parliament. They were therefore able to put a candidate for *bupati* forward without forming any coalition with another party within the DPRD. PDI-P put Yudas forward as their candidate and Partai Golkar choose to put Kortanius, who acted as vice chair of the DPRD at that time, forward for the position of vice *bupati*. Being without a candidate of their own, Partai Nasional Demokrat (Nasdem), Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN), Parti Gerakan Indonesia Raya (Gerindra) and Partai Persatuan Indonesia (Perindo) joined the PDI-P – Golkar coalition in their support for Kortanius and Yudas. Kortanius and Yudas had to stand up against Rijel Samaloisa who coupled up with Binsar Saleleubaja, the two of them being supported by Partai Hati Nurani Rakyat (Hanura) and Partai Demokrat. The PDI-P, Partai Golkar and Hanura are part of the governing coalition under Indonesia's current president Joko Widodo and are therefore inclined to make sure that their candidate for the upcoming *pilpres* will be supported at the local level. Yudas and Kortanius enjoyed the support of precisely those parties. While it is denied that political parties have transferred money to their regional offices in order to support their candidates in the *pilkada*, it is a fact that political headquarters have deposited considerable amounts of money labelled as *ongkos logistik* (logistic expenses) to their provincial and regional branches (personal communication with Juniator Tulus 2018). These funds enabled Yudas and Kortanius to also campaign in the more remote areas of Simatalu and Simalegi on the island of Siberut. Having less funds to spend, Rijel and Binsar never went campaigning in these areas. Votes from these two areas were eventually decisive for the final victory of Yudas and Kortanius. As with every election, the 2017 *pilkada* also triggered rumours that the counting of votes would not have been fair. Whether or not this was actually true will always remain an unanswered question whereas there were no supervisors present in the areas of Simatalu and Simalegi the moment the votes were counted (personal communication with Juniator Tulus 2018).

The introduction of direct elections at the local level was believed to restrict the apparent decentralisation of corruption and strengthen democracy. Direct elections indeed made it more difficult for local parliaments to harass local administrators with their corruptive practices. The party politics that increased after the introduction of direct

elections, however, seriously hindered the development of democracy at the local level. Whereas government support for political parties was reduced in 2005, party bosses in Jakarta tried to make money from the regional elections by making local candidates pay considerable amounts of money in order to be allowed to run for office (Mietzner 2010a, 2010b; Schulte Nordholt 2008, 2012). For those willing to run for office in Mentawai this almost always meant that an external sponsor had to be found, automatically rendering the candidate vulnerable to the agenda of that sponsor. Despite the introduction of direct elections and the several adjustments that were made to the voting system in the course of time, the Mentawaiian public has become more and more cynical towards politicians and their promises. Common Mentawaiians believe that politicians make a lot of promises, but actually do very little to further the development of the archipelago. Politicians are often classified as liars and thieves busy to serve their personal interests only. Mentawaiians in general also believe that it eventually does not matter who is chosen as *bupati* or as a member of the DPRD, because in the end it comes down to replacing one corrupt politician with another corrupt politician (see also Eindhoven 2007). Despite their cynical standpoint, common Mentawaiians in general are not shying away from accepting or even openly soliciting for goods and services during the campaigning. Asking for votes while bringing nothing in return is even classified as improper behaviour. Although goods and services are generally happily accepted, voters often do not feel honour-bound to actually vote for the donor. Candidates, however, felt betrayed and asked for their *oleh-oleh* (presents) to be returned after they had failed to obtain the position they had ran for, leading of course to uncomfortable quarrels with the public. Despite the fact that the public is involved in the campaigning, it is for a fact that common people are increasingly excluded from the political processes taking place. In the literature this process is often equated with a marginalisation of the public sphere and stands in rather sharp contrast with the earlier expectation that regional autonomy would lead to more democracy at the local level and a rise of civil society (Buehler 2010).

In November 2011, only few days after Edison was replaced by Yudas as *bupati*, Edison was detained on suspicion of alleged misappropriation of government funds. He was suspected of the misappropriation of 1.5 billion Rupiah (10% of the total budget) of the return on forest revenues (Provisi Sumber Daya Hutan – PSDH) during his first term. The fact that Edison was only taken to court in 2011 had everything to do with the fact that the former governor of West Sumatera, Gamawan Fauzi had become the Minister of Internal Affairs by that time. Fauzi, decorated for his efforts to battle corruption, had been bound with his hands on his back during his term as governor of West Sumatra. As the Minister of Internal Affairs, Fauzi started an investigation into the alleged corrupt practices of Edison during the time the latter acted as *bupati* for the Mentawaiian region. In July 2012 Edison was sentenced to 4 years in prison. Edison has always insisted that he had nothing to do with this corruption case. Edison remained convinced of the fact that the unpleasant relations between Mentawai and the Sumatran mainland were the main reason for Fauzi's hostile stance towards him personally.

Four years before Edison was sentenced to prison, Kurnia Sakerebau, former head of the Department of Education, also served 2 years in prison. He was sentenced for the

misappropriation of 1.2 billion Rupiah allocated for the development of education in Mentawai. While the general public always remained divided about the question whether or not Edison was involved in corruptive practices, Kurnia was declared guilty even before he was officially sentenced. Kurnia was personally held responsible for the fact that education in Mentawai remained lacking behind for such a long time.

And even Yudas Sabaggalet was interrogated at the police headquarters Padang in late February 2013 for alleged corruption of a fund meant for the rehabilitation of victims of the October 2010 earthquake and tsunami. Half of this fund (1.3 billion Rupiah) made available by Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana (BNPB), Indonesia's national board for disaster management, was already used while there had been no relief or rehabilitation activities in the field (Padang Ekspres 27/2/13). It seems that Yudas would have said that the money was indeed used for rehabilitation and reconstruction activities and that he welcomed anyone who wanted to check this for themselves. This was basically the end of this corruption case while local communities in north Siberut, that were hit hardest by the 2010 earthquake and subsequent tsunami, insisted that they had not received any help from the local government.

By the end of his first term Edison eventually agreed the archipelago to be redivided from four to ten *kecamatan* (sub-districts) (Puailiggoubat 2002k). This triggered a new round of applications for the civil service as well as a second boom in construction activities. Transportation facilities between the islands were also further upgraded and by the end of his second term (2006-2011) Edison launched the idea of constructing a road network called *Jalan Trans Mentawai*. When Yudas became *bupati* in 2011 he quickly transferred this idea to his own agenda and started constructing in 2012 on the island of Sipora. Local contractor companies as well as the Indonesian national armed forces (TNI) are involved in the construction of the *Jalan Trans Mentawai*. Nearly one third of the total costs for this prestigious road network is charged from the national budget, while the remaining two third is accounted for by the local budget (APBD) on which it is weighing heavily. While Yudas had planned the project to be finished by the end of 2017, the road is still under construction at the time of this writing. In a playful protest in North Siberut, people started to plant banana trees on the unfinished part of the road between Sikabalu and Monganpoula and sent pictures of their plantings to the *bupati* hoping to draw his attention to their daily struggle to travel along this road. Yudas reacted through social media suggesting that this part of the *Jalan Trans Mentawai* had so far not been finished due to the fact that local communities had obstructed construction by planting banana trees on the cleared spaces. At the beginning of 2018, Yudas has said that he would do everything he could in order for the *Jalan Trans Mentawai* to be finished by the end of the year. He also suggested that the next item on his development agenda would be the construction and upgrading of several harbours on all four Mentawai Islands (Kabar24 2018).

At the beginning of 2018 the Mentawaians were suddenly confronted with a megalomaniac development project called Mentawai Bay. Under the banner of *Kawasan Ekonomi Khusus* (KEK), the central government wishes to upgrade the economy in nineteen regions Indonesia-wide. Two of these KEK are planned for West Sumatra, one in

Mandeh on the Sumatran mainland and the other in Mentawai. Mentawai Bay consists of an integrated tourist area enhancing the development of a harbour, an international airport, various hotels, resorts and apartments, restaurants, a shopping centre, a zoo, schools, a hospital, a water garden and various museums and an art centre. Mentawai Bay is located in the south of Siberut. In the master plan produced by the main investor of this project, PT Putra Mahakarya Sentosa, Mentawai Bay is projected over the village of Pasakiat Taillelu covering 2639 ha of land that is officially classified as *areal penggunaan lain* – APL (area for alternative use), but is actually in use by local communities for their gardens.¹⁷⁴ A total of eleven trillion Rupiah is budgeted for this project paid for by private investors. An actual start of the constructions is planned for 2019 (Mentawaikita 2018).

Preparations for this project already started in 2016, but local communities were confronted with requests to hand over their lands to the main investor only last January. Without giving much publicity to the project, last April it was suddenly announced that local communities had agreed to hand over their lands and that the environmental impact assessment was awaiting approval of the governor (Metro Andalas 2018).

¹⁷⁴ PT Putra Mahakarya Sentosa is a part of the Sentosa Group, a Surabaya-based hospitality management corporation, which owns, operates and develops apartments, hotels and properties in Indonesia. They are mainly active in Bali and Surabaya (Sentosa Group 2018).



Mentawai Bay poster by Sentosa Group (Obtained from gendovara.com)

Local communities are, however, not that unanimous about the handing over of their lands. Local communities have been offered 750.000 Rupiah per month for every hundred coconut trees that will disappear as a result of the development of Mentawai Bay. Communities in south Siberut produce a significant amount of copra and have calculated that they can make almost three times as much money by producing copra than by receiving the compensation for trees lost to the Mentawai Bay project. They are furthermore promised two million Rupiah every month for a duration of five years for the use of their land. The exact status of their land after these five years is not included in the appointments made with the local communities. As a result people can only speculate about whom will be seen as the owner of the land after these five years.

While the first signs of disagreements at the local level already start to unfold, various Mentawaians active on social media start questioning this mass tourism project. The project aims at economic development, but the project master plan fails to explain how local communities in Mentawai will be included in the project. Apart from the compensation paid to local communities who will lose their livelihoods to the project, the master plan mentions a significant increase in local income whereas local communities will be enabled to sell their agricultural products on the local market. Whereas local communities will lose their land and garden to the project the question is what agricultural products will actually be marketed by local communities. Messages on social media are questioning the general absence of the Mentawaians from the master plan as well as the environmental impact assessment and fear the marginalisation of local communities within their own territory. Especially the separation from their (ancestral) lands is seen as a major threat to their identity (Harian Haluan 2018a, 2018b).

Questionable also is the stance and position of the local government in the Mentawai Bay negotiations. Whereas Mentawai Bay is projected on so-called APL lands, it is local communities and local government that should make decisions about the way in which this land is put to use. It is, however, mainly the Ministry of Forestry and the Ministry of Tourism together with PT Putra Mahakarya Sentosa that have been dealing with the land issues attached to KEK Mentawai. So far the local government has been seemingly absent from the negotiations and have according to parties concerned only facilitated the smooth passage of procedures (personal communication with Juniator Tulus September 2018). While busy campaigning for the 2019 parliamentary elections (*pemilu legislatif - pileg*) candidates for the DPRD have, probably in an attempt to avoid the undermining of their position, chosen not to mention KEK while visiting local communities.

People active on social media believe that the local communities in south Siberut are left on their own and call for public uprising. The social media activists believe that local communities in Tailaleu are unilaterally informed and can therefore be deceived and misled by all too pretty promises. People on social media feel that there is need for action and call upon their NGOs to take action. However, Yayasan Citra Mandiri (YCM), basically the only NGO left in the field, does not seem to be inclined to take action. The current director of YCM, Qbar Rivai Lubis, does indeed seem to have doubts about the Mentawai Bay project, but makes the impression to be little inclined to take action. This

in all probability has everything to do with the fact that vice *bupati* Kortanius is also still a member of the board of YCM.

While Edison mainly focussed on the development of the bureaucracy and the physical development of the archipelago, Yudas is now shifting his focus in the direction of economic development. This economic development is mainly outsider driven and based on the interests of the investors rather than that of local communities.

The development of the local bureaucracy and the physical development of the archipelago have sooner or later served the majority of the Mentawaians to a greater or a lesser extent. Some people had to wait for a long time to finally be hired as a civil servant. Some villages only received electricity three years ago, but eventually everybody gained something from Edison's efforts. This is probably questionable when big economic development project like KEK Mentawai are going ahead in next few years. It is likely that local communities stand to loose from projects like these. It will deprive them from their lands and their livelihoods. With potentially powerful international conservation agencies leaving the scene and civil society organisations hollowed, local communities in Mentawai seem to be on their own.

It will be interesting to see how local communities are going to deal with these recent developments. The option of retreat will become increasingly limited as land will become a scarce commodity as far as that is not the case already. This means that local communities will once more have to adapt to outsider influences, becoming marginalised within their own territory this time.

