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## [The Coercion of the Indonesia's New Capital City Mega-Project and the Neglect of the Balik People's Voices](#)

*The Balik People will bear the impacts of the plans to build a New Capital City mega-project in Borneo, Indonesia. Government officials and business elites in the country are certainly among those who will enjoy the benefits. A Balik woman said, "No one wants to hear our voices," as she already feels the massive land and culture grab that this project will entail.*

*[This article is also available in Bahasa Indonesia](#)*

Indonesia's government is planning to move its capital city from Jakarta in Java to the island of Borneo during the first quarter of 2024. The chosen location for this real-state megaproject is an area split between North Penajam Paser Regency and Kutai Kartanegara Regency in the province of East Kalimantan, in Borneo. The government plans to transform 200,000 hectares of forest into the country's new administrative headquarters. This project comes on top of the already existing mining, logging, and oil palm plantation concessions, which have taken a heavy toll on Borneo's rainforests and forest-dependent communities.

The Balik People live in the midst of the New Capital City project site. This article highlights their voices. The Balik People are spread around several villages, such as the village of Pemaluan with 64 families, the village of Sabut, Harapan Baru and other villages in the District of Sepaku. Their traditional chief, Jubain, predicts conflicts with the influx of migrants as masses of people move to the New Capital location, while massive land grabs have already started to be felt in their communities.

### ***The Story of Jubain and the Balik People in Borneo***

One morning, Jubain (56), a traditional chief of the Balik People, rushed to the city of Balikpapan. Together with some other community members, he went there in response to the invitation of Indonesia's President Jokowi for a meeting with community leaders in East Kalimantan. The meeting was planned on the sidelines of the President's visit to the candidate site for the New Capital City (IKN, *Ibu Kota Negara*) and the inauguration of the Balikpapan-Samarinda toll road on December 17, 2019. However, instead of being given the opportunity to communicate the views of the communities, Jubain and the other leaders were not even allowed to approach the meeting room.

"You couldn't even get close, let alone enter. So we just sat outside the meeting room," Jubain lamented. He later learned that there was no space for questions at the meeting and therefore the public did not have the opportunity to express any question or concern.

The Balik People's chief was unquestionably disappointed. "We live in the very location of the New Capital City, in ring one. If they want to take over our village, where will we go?" asked Jubain. "He [the President] is the big boss. If he does not want to listen to criticism from the public and the communities, we are all surely in big trouble," he continued.

Jubain's Balik community is in fact among those who will bear the impacts of the New Capital City

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mega project, while the government officials and entrepreneurs are certainly among those who will enjoy the benefits. Being aware of that, Jubain said, "If these people are elitists and businessmen, they will love the idea." Besides, Dahlia, a dancer from the Balik community who owns an art studio in Harapan Baru village, said that although the New Capital City project has not yet been implemented, the problems can already be felt. "I can't imagine what will happen when the project is ready to be implemented," she said. "But it is nevertheless useless", Dahlia continued, "No one wants to hear our voices. I want to cry and scream. I feel like being colonized even though we are in a free and independent country."

For example, Jubain explained that as soon as the government designated the district of Sepaku as a candidate for the New Capital City, land disputes started to appear. "The biggest problem is the land issue," he said. Before the project arrived to the district, the village was safe and sound. "In the past, nobody thought that their land was very valuable. Now, for example, 15x20 square meter plots of land are already worth tens of million Indonesian Rupiahs. Before, the highest price was only eight millions [around 550 dollars]," he said. Now, when the land is certified, meaning measured and recorded by the government, its price could multiply into one billion Indonesian Rupiahs [around 69 thousand dollars] per hectare.

The communities from this district already had felt much suffering during the period of timber extraction by the International Timber Company Indonesia (ITCI) and PT ITCI Hutani Manunggal (IHM). The presence of the New Capital City megaproject is making things worst. Jubain sorrowfully added that "[the New Capital City] will form a barrier that will slowly destroy and wipe out the traditional culture of the Balik People."

### ***The New Capital City Concession Overlaps Balik Community's Land***

Jubain said that the New Capital City area is in the IHM and ITCI concessions. This area is part of the settlement of the Balik people. "The IHM concession is about 200 meters from my house", he stated. "I spoke with the IHM company's public relations officer and he said that the area that has been designated as the capital city has been guarded by the authorities," he continued.

Not long after Jubain's village was designated as a candidate for the New Capital, a group of people came to Pemaluan to measure and record the community lands. They have a program to certify 1000 plots for residents who live in the New Capital City project area. "I have about 5 hectares that are now in the concession area, it used to be our parents' garden. We were here first. We've been here for a long time. How come there is suddenly a map with this concession?," said Jubain. He criticized that people in Pemaluan were not even consulted about the plans for the New Capital City.

The history of this area shows that the Balik People have long inhabited it and have been carrying out their traditions and culture for generations. "We're not in the company (area), it is the company which is in our people's land." Jubain declared.

In addition to the land that the government has locked in for the logging concessions, various parties are pressuring to make the land of the residents in Pemaluan available for this new project. "Now there are already several residents in Pemaluan who sold their land," he lamented.

He also expressed his deep disappointment with the North Penajam Paser Regency government when the New Capital City project was determined for their area. There was no communication with the residents and the Balik community. "The regent immediately agreed to release and clear the land for the project. Which land are they talking about? That's the problem. They don't know the problems

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inside and the impacts to the people," Jubain said.

### ***The Tactics of the Traditional Villages' Heads***

Jubain is officially recognized as the customary head from the North Penajam Paser Regency customary institution by the local government, and was officially elected by his community in 2017. Yet, in the village of Sabut, the customary chief was appointed by the city of Balikpapan. "No election", he said, "Suddenly, there is a village head. It is the outsider who decide and appointed the customary head". According to Jubain, there is obviously an interest to take advantage of this.

Jubain explained that he had been visited by people who claimed to be members of the Balik community. However, none of these people spoke Balik language. They claimed to want to help the Balinese to obtain their customary land. Jubain then politely refused, saying that he could not make decisions on his own because there are other customary heads in the regency level. If they said yes then Jubain would also agree.

Although he admitted that he had different views with the district traditional institutions regarding the presence of the New Capital City, he thinks it is necessary to pay attention to the impacts in the future. He is worried about the people from other places and cities who will come to their lands. "We are worried if those people are big businessmen. Our values, habits, culture, language, will be lost. If our lands are taken away and we are separated, we do not know where to go," said Jubain.

### ***The Destruction Started with the Arrival of ITCI and IHM***

The hustle and bustle of the company's operations of clearing the forests, Jubain explained, has also impacts on socio-cultural changes in the community. He remembers his childhood when the ITCI company started working in the late 1960s. ITCI started by building port facilities and roads. Now this company has a concession area of 173,395 hectares which is in ring two of the New Capital project. ITCI's president is the younger brother of Prabowo Subianto, the Minister of Defense. The company received a Timber Forest Product Utilization Business Permit (IUPHHK-HA) in 2012.

Sukanto Tanoto is another concession holder in the core area of the New Capital City project site. He acquire the concession from Hashim Djojohadikusumo in 2006. He holds a special permit to exploit timber from industrial plantations (IUPHHK – HT) of PT. International Timber Corporation Indonesia Hutani Manunggal (PT. ITCI HM). This concession covers an area of 161,127 hectares, of which 5,644 hectares overlap with the core area of the New Capital project site.

From 1972 to 2006, Jubain and the people in his village were forced to breathe in the dust that spilled from the highway which only stopped when it rained. "Day and night working hauling wood. It can be said that every 10 minutes their large fleet passes".

The highway created by the ITCI company divided Jubain's village. "There's nothing left there", he said. This company made an open storage area (*manampung*) in the port, which covers around 5 hectares. There they pile up large logs with the smallest diameter that they transport to the Sepaku District and its surroundings.

In Pemaluan Village, Jubain said, deforestation was rampant between 1984-1985. Logging trucks and wood clamping cars roared every day. The company people cut down the forest around the village without mercy. Along the sides of the paths, they would completely clear the forest. "Once the company entered our land, we lost our livelihoods, our forests, everything was bare because the

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trees were cut down," Jubain regretted.

### **Loss of Culture**

Jubain explained how the Balik People used to live on the edges of the forests and rivers. His parents used to live from the forest. Daily activities were looking for resin, rattan and making wooden roof shingles. "The products were sold to the city of Balikpapan," he recalled.

The destruction of the forest also caused the *mulun* tradition (Balik medicine tradition) to be eroded or lost. He suggested that there is a close relationship between the medicinal traditions and the loss of the forests as living spaces. "The culture began to disappear when there was a lot of forest clearing happening here," he explained.

He also remembers the time when he and his late father lived from farming around the village. He himself witnessed deforestation when he was a laborer collecting wood twigs to be used as fuel for the company's polywood production.

According to him, the people from the company controlled everything. "We couldn't do anything because we knew that during the military era, the era of Suharto, the guards had security with the army in charge. We were afraid that between 1985 to 1986 we would no longer be allowed to work with wood, using chainsaw, unless you are a company man," he said.

Some village people however were attracted to join the search for wood that had not been taken by the company. "Some people from the village would be taken to the police for stealing wood in the company area," said Jubain.

Not only was their living space deforested, at that time the company didn't care about the Balik People, for example, in terms of education.

Jubain said that the ITCI company has its own school. Village children are not allowed to go to school there. Only people who are permanent workers in the company can receive education at ITCI schools. In addition to employees, you can enroll as long as you pay tuition and fees. Something that is obviously difficult for the villagers. The lives of village people and company people are inversely proportional. "The company people are wealthy and live a very comfortable life," he said.

Before he was chosen by the Balik community as the head of *adat* or customary, he had served as *wakar* or heavy equipment car guard at the IHM contractor company. He did this to make a living, something that was difficult due to the presence of the company.

According to Jubain, all of this started because people think that the Balik community does not exist in the forest area of Sepaku. "Helicopters flew by, it was said that they were making a map. But maybe because they saw it from the air, they didn't know that there were people living below, the Balik People," said Jubain. Moreover, he continued, "our parents' house used to have thatched roofs. It's all green from above, therefore, the company people could not see that there are houses down here".

After the ITCI company cleared all the forests in 2006, part of its concession changed to ITCI Hutani Mandiri (IHM), which planted acacia wood. "Acacia species will die after more than five years, so they harvest every five years," said Jubain

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This company took the land of the Balik People. The place where the Balik used to farm and grow fruit was suddenly inside the company's concession. "First came ITCI, then there was IHM, and there was nothing for us. Now another plan is added with the establishment of the New Capital City (IKN)," Jubain said. He believes it is a political atrocity.

### ***Community-Owned Plants Cleared by the Company***

On November 22, 2019, the Balik People were shocked to see a heavy equipment excavator belonging to PT ITCI Hutani Mandiri (IHM). The crops of the local residents, such as rubber plants, were cleared by the IHM company. The people's agricultural land near the Karnain River got destroyed. The Balik village has also been designated as part of the core area of the New Capital City project site.

One resident of Pemaluan, Menyu, said that their area was evicted without prior notification. "Our agricultural land, covering an area of about 2 hectares with 600 rubber trees and ten palm trees and 20 coconut trees, was found razed to the ground," said Menyu. There was no agreement. The company wanted to compensate with 2 million Indonesian Rupiahs [around 140 dollars], but the residents refused. "The area is currently being replanted [with industrial tree plantations] by the IHM company," said Jubain.

Menyu explained that the Balik people have a deep farming tradition, like other people in Kalimantan. The system is based on the concept of rotating farming. After harvesting, the land is left for a few years, and when it is recovered and fertile, then the farmer would come and replant agricultural crops.

"When the land is left to recover, usually the residents would grow fruit, like *durian lai* and tamarind, or *payang* that looks like a baseball," said Menyu. According to him, the fruit trees are a mark or symbol that the land belongs to the customary management area. "This is the sign of the legality of the Balik people," he said.

Now, however, it is difficult to prove the legality of the area as the company has evicted everything. "This is in the Sabut area, on the left if we go to Sepaku, fruits are everywhere, everything is there durian lai, langsung, rambutan, hundreds of hectares, people now are trying to sue [the company for destroying their fruit trees]. The Mobile Brigade were sent down to intimidate us," Menyu said. The Mobile Brigade is Indonesia's militarized division of the police. Known as BRIMOB, they are one of the most equipped security apparatus at the moment in the country. The government has categorized the New Capital City project as a 'national strategic project' and thus, the BRIMOB is also in charge of its 'security'.

The area was traditionally managed by residents long before Indonesia's independence. The land managed by residents is in the Pemaluan River ecosystem and its tributaries. However, "residents can no longer rely on these rivers, mainly because of the changes in water quality that are getting worse". According to Jubain, that is related to the forest exploitation carried out by the company. Likewise, "as soon as the company built the roads, residents moved up following the road," Jubain explained.

Jubain recalled that before the companies arrived they never lacked water because the rivers provided the clean water they needed. The disruption began to be felt since the 1990s.

The Balik people have been facing the impacts of mainly logging companies for decades, but despite

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the magnitude of the destruction caused by the logging operations, they managed to remain in their lands, survive and keep their culture alive. The plans of moving the capital to their territory are a serious threat to all the region and must be stopped before it happens.

*Abdallah Naem,  
Indonesian activist and journalist*