

Indonesia: reformulating indigenous identity

Theme >
Indonesia

In September 2003 hundreds of people gathered on Lombok island for the second meeting of Aliansi Masyarakat Aadat Nusantara (AMAN), Indonesia's Indigenous Peoples' Organisation. Four years after the first meeting in Jakarta, it assessed progress towards recognition of indigenous peoples' rights in Indonesia. The meeting ended, just like the first one, with demands placed on the state: 'if the state does not recognize us, we shall not recognize the state'.

By Gerard A. Persoon

Indigenous or tribal peoples in Indonesia comprise more than one hundred different ethnic groups and sub-groups: hunters and gatherers in Sumatra, shifting agriculturalists in Kalimantan and present day West Papua, and dispersed maritime nomads. Together, they are estimated to number one-and-a-half million.

The term 'indigenous people' is new to Indonesia. Until recently, tribal peoples were officially called *masyarakat terasing*, or isolated community. Judging by the available documents of the Department of Social Affairs, the concepts *Orang Asli* (Original or Indigenous People) used in Malaysia, or Indigenous Tribes, *Inheemse Volksstammen*, the term used in Dutch colonial writings, was never considered.

In English translation, 'tribal' peoples or groups is a more neutral term than isolated group. Essential to the anthropological meaning of the word 'tribe' or 'tribal' is a strong degree of self-sufficiency, not only in means of existence, but in language, religion, political leadership and legal authority. A strong sense of cultural identity apart from the social mainstream is also characteristic of these peoples.

Back to the mainstream

Shortly after Indonesian independence, the Department of Social Affairs was given charge of all tribal peoples in the country. The Department focused initially on a limited number of small impoverished groups, in particular Sumatran groups such as the Kubu and the Mentawaians. Relief projects were implemented, but with limited impact. In general, tribal peoples were considered to occupy state forest land for which logging and mining concessions could be granted.

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The goal of the Indonesian government is to integrate the tribal groups into the social and cultural mainstream of the country. For a variety of reasons, it is claimed, these groups lost touch with the main currents of social, religious, political and economic change. Thus it is the obligation of the state to bring them back into the mainstream. This policy is expressed in terms of housing and settlement, modes of production, cultural expression, formal education, health care, religion and interaction with other parts of society.

Successive Indonesian governments have denied that the international discourse on indigenous peoples has any relevance to the country. Governments have avoided active participation in international forums, and have barred representatives of ethnic minorities from representing Indonesia at this level. Spokespersons from East Timor, the Moluccas or West Papua (Irian Jaya) who had found asylum elsewhere at times attended these international forums to bring the plight of their homelands to international attention. This had little impact within Indonesia, and until recently, the international community rarely took action.

External influence

Over the years, international organizations have adopted guidelines, principles and policies on the rights and position of indigenous people. Though the Indonesian government often declares them inapplicable to the country, in practice they are relevant, at least to some extent. The World Bank has altered its policy on financing transmigration projects following exposure of the consequences for tribal or indigenous peoples. The Indonesian Biodiversity Conservation Project of the Asian Development Bank could not have been implemented without indigenous peoples' involvement through local organizations. The World Wildlife Fund began to work more closely with indigenous peoples under its new statement of principles in 1996.

This is not to say that indigenous peoples in Indonesia have come to be recognised as such through international organizations. But to some degree, these organizations have imported the international discourse on indigenous peoples via their financial power and operational structures. This is crucial for what has happened in Indonesia's recent past and what is likely to happen in the near future.

AMAN (Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara)

Since the fall of President Suharto in 1998, a wave of democratisation has swept the country. Political parties were founded while non-governmental organizations have blossomed in many areas. In March 1999, Jakarta witnessed a mass demonstration by indigenous peoples identifying themselves as *masyarakat adat*.¹ Hundreds of people, many in traditional outfits, were present, representing more than one hundred ethnic groups. The demonstration was supported by Western organizations, though their support was never made explicit. To many officials, the size of the demonstration came as a surprise. While high officials were invited to discuss *masyarakat adat* demands, most did not show up. The task was left to lower officials, many of whom were unprepared and lacked the authority to speak on the issues raised.

At the end of the gathering the following demands were formulated: (1) elimination of terms which denigrate indigenous people and their rights; (2) recognition of the diversity among indigenous peoples and of their rights, knowledge and skills; (3) representation in state institutions; (4) restoration of rights over land and natural resources; (5) amendment of the concept of state control in the Basic Agrarian Law and the Forestry and Mining Act; (6) discussion with the government and private sector on land and resource use; (7) social welfare programmes must not violate indigenous rights; (8) no military involvement in civil society as currently exists under the Armed Forces 'Dual Function' doctrine; (9) authorities must find a fair means to settle the issue of self-determination. It is the state's responsibility to restore the rights of indigenous peoples, violated for so long; and (10) the state must sign international agreements protecting the rights of indigenous peoples, e.g. ILO Convention 169 and participate in the formulation of the UN Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.²

Decentralizing Indonesia

Since that first meeting the process of decentralization has effected all corners of the country. Provincial and district governments and officials are now more powerful, and receive a larger share of income generated from the exploitation of natural resources in their areas. The awareness of past injustices – violation of territorial rights, forced resettlement and various kinds of repression – is fuelling a wave of ethnic identification across the country. AMAN stimulates this by holding regional meetings and building local organizations campaigning for greater territorial rights. This is usually combined with awareness-raising of ethnic identity and the re-valuation of cultural traditions. As many indigenous peoples live in areas

Logging on Sarabua, Siberut, West Sumatra



courtesy of author

of high biodiversity, this overlap of cultural and biological diversity can be used for political purposes. Reclaiming ancestral lands within national parks, indigenous peoples point to their cultural and religious practices that contribute to sustainable resource use. If no longer practiced, efforts should be made to revitalize such traditions.

Recent developments in the swamp forests of Central Kalimantan, a high biodiversity area with one of the largest orangutan populations in Borneo, provides an interesting example. As logging operations involving both outsiders and the local Ngaju Dayak grew in scale, the local environment came under severe pressure. But partly as a result of external interest in the peat swamp forest, there are efforts to strengthen the eco-friendly image of the local population and their modes of



AMAN logo

resource use, reflected in the May 2002 Declaration of the Ecological Region of Central Kalimantan by the 'traditional Dayak chiefs and informal leaders of Central Kalimantan'. Many other communities have adopted similar strategies, realising that the discourse on indigenous rights is to some degree based on the belief that they are better stewards of the environment. At the same time, claiming a larger share of the benefits helps to compensate for the injustice of the past.

Future prospects

The modern political history of Indonesia has yet to be written, but new forms of democratisation feature prominently in contemporary developments. In the 2004 national elections, indigenous peoples' issues did not feature prominently despite AMAN's efforts to raise interest among party and presidential candidates. A complicating factor is that the ambitions of various ethnic groups and indigenous peoples still differ widely over issues such as land rights, self determination and equitable distribution of the benefits from natural resources.

Though the Indonesian indigenous peoples' movement is still politically weak, it will likely gain in strength in the near future. It is likely that the spreading international discourse on indigenous peoples will provide opportunities for ethnic groups to articulate their rights and garner support within a rapidly changing Indonesia. AMAN will act as a co-ordinating force; the movement in Indonesia will also be inspired by developments in other countries such as the Philippines. ◀

Notes

1. *Adat* is a complicated concept. It encompasses concepts such as culture, customs and systems of local justice. In some contexts it is also understood as the traditional lifestyle of a particular community. *Adat* land is usually understood as the (communal) village territory.
2. The demands were, of course, formulated in Indonesian. The central term here is *masyarakat adat*, defined by AMAN as: 'our communities whose lives are based on customary rights to certain lands which have been handed down through generations. We exert sovereignty over these lands and natural resources. Our societies and cultures are governed by customary laws and customary institutions which sustain the continuity of our communities'. In the Indonesian text the English words 'Indigenous Peoples' are used once, in relation to the UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples (AMAN 1999). In the English translation, *masyarakat adat* is translated as indigenous peoples (Down to Earth, special issue 1999)

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