



The road to Nusantara: process, challenges and opportunities

edited by Julia M. Lau, Athiqah Nur Alami, Siwage Dharma Negara and Yanuar Nugroho, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing in collaboration with BRIN, Jakarta, 2023, xxvi + 282 pp., \$45.00 (pbk), ISBN 9789815104226

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BOOK REVIEW

The road to Nusantara: process, challenges and opportunities, edited by Julia M. Lau, Athiqah Nur Alami, Siwage Dharma Negara and Yanuar Nugroho, Singapore, ISEAS Publishing in collaboration with BRIN, Jakarta, 2023, xxvi + 282 pp., \$45.00 (pbk), ISBN 9789815104226

The Road to Nusantara is a book about the ‘process, challenges and opportunities’ in the building of Indonesia’s future national capital (the *Ibu Kota Negara* – IKN), called *Nusantara* – a name archaic enough to make Indonesians root the country in its pre-colonial past. Believed to be first coined by the last Hindu-Buddhist Javanese kingdom of Majapahit that reigned from the thirteenth to sixteenth century, Nusantara refers to an aspiration for an integrated archipelagic state. Yet Nusantara in the old Javanese manuscripts also means ‘the outer/other islands’ occupied by vassal kingdoms that enjoyed autonomy but were required to pay tribute to the centralized polity.

The Road to Nusantara does not deal with the question of what is in a name. It also does not aim to oppose the new capital city project even though it remains unpopular if not controversial. The book is intended to offer information, critiques and recommendations to a project that remains obscure and poorly understood. A product of collaboration between two major government research institutes, the Singapore based Yusof Ishak Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and the newly formed Indonesia’s National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), the book’s eleven chapters discuss a series of important topics for the Indonesian state to consider.

As a book sponsored by government institutions, it is perhaps appropriate to first consider the view of Bambang Susantono, the Chairman of Nusantara National Capital Authority, who wrote one of the Forewords. A former transport minister, Susantono is a highly competent technocrat, a Berkeley graduate in infrastructure planning, who shows no interest in politics. As the Chairman of the IKN, Susantono’s primary task is to provide a steady hand to build the new capital according to the dream of creating

a city that is both livable and lovable, built atop the principles of green, smart, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable. This model city can then be replicated when developing other cities in Indonesia, and ultimately help the nation to leapfrog to become a more prosperous and sustainable country (ix).

There is a lot to digest in this statement, including the desire of turning the new capital city into a model city for other Indonesian cities, but Susantono’s focus is on fulfilling the dream for a ‘green, smart, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable’ city. The book, fortunately, serves as a reminder that such a dream must necessarily be accompanied by an awareness of the possibility of a nightmare. The short introduction by the editors succinctly summarizes the reasonableness and the risks of the dream. The use of adjectives such as ‘ambitious’, ‘gigantic’ and ‘complex challenges’ serves as a warning, but the editors also suggest that Nusantara is not the dream of a single individual. It should not be seen as a personal legacy of President Joko Widodo. Nusantara is seen as a ‘national’ dream, if not a national destiny. The stake is high, and the Introduction adds another layer of urgency. The editors argue that there is no comparable case. Nusantara is unlike any other capital city relocation. As the ‘first comprehensive collection of academic writing and research findings’, the contributors, almost all

of whom are Indonesian researchers, seem to carry the burden of representing IKN and setting a right path for the city and the nation to take. The topics of the book are dominated by the expanded field of governance that ranges across economics, finance, law, planning, security, environment justice and human rights.

Essays in the first half of the book deal with questions around the historical contexts, legitimacy, desirability and financial feasibility of Nusantara. The first chapter, by Yanuar Nugroho, Wasisto Raharjo Jati, Pradita Devis Dukarno and Iryan Ali Herdiansyah, offers an account of the similar and different intentions of previous presidents – Sukarno, Suharto and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono – and notes their top-down decision-making processes. The Jokowi era, they point out, while elite-driven, includes a bottom-up agenda. And it manages to produce the Law for the IKN (the ‘Undang Undang IKN’). It is not clear, however, to what extent Nusantara and its legal formation represents a ‘bottom-up’ approach. The authors nevertheless confirm that the relocation is a political showcase. There is no information about the actors behind the IKN Law or the key players behind the IKN project and the choice of the location, even though the authors mention the business interests of those close to Jokowi who own concessions in the area.

Chapter 2, by Mardiyanto Wahyu Tryatmoko and Koichi Kawamura, is one of the best chapters, offering an account of the contradiction that underlies the institutional arrangements of IKN regulations. They characterize IKN as a local government without local authority. Their concern raises the question of whether the relocation of the capital city from the metropolis to less developed regions is after all a strategy for recentralization. The IKN Law ignores regional autonomy, which also means no voting rights for the residents (locals or immigrants). The president appoints the head of the regional government, which is currently represented by the IKN Authority, chaired by Susantono whose mandate is limited to carrying out the administrative functions for the relocation and the technocratic planning development of the new capital. This has made IKN a city-state of exception, where power is in the hand of the central government. This chapter presents a warning that IKN should never be a ‘model city’ because its centralistic institutional arrangement is a violation of democracy and autonomy in Indonesia.

The practice of local democracy (i.e. from below) is the focus of Chapter 3 by Ian Douglas Wilson. A unique contribution for unlike other chapters that refer to Jakarta negatively, Wilson calls for learning from Jakarta. He considers the spatial effects of dialectical tensions between the city and the nation that characterize the post-reformasi Jakarta. He shows Jakarta as a space of hope where political praxis has become possible. Jakarta’s streets (once the space of order and disciplinary practice under Suharto regime) offer spectacles of social and political movements. Wilson’s chapter in effect, suggests that the problem of IKN lies in its remoteness from the people, for such a distance would prevent democratic practices from below.

While the megaproject gives hardly any space for political engagement from below, Chapter 4 by Riri Kusumarani and Anne Parlina discusses the government’s idea for public participation. In 2020, after the withdrawal of Japan’s SoftBank Corporation from its initial plan to contribute US\$100 billion, Susantono initiated the notion of inviting the public to contribute to the financing of the new capital through crowdfunding. Yet this chapter reveals only the profound unpreparedness of both the government and the public to engage with such a funding scheme. The authors nevertheless provide some recommendations based on successful practices of ‘civic crowdfunding’ from developed countries.

In Chapter 5, Dimas Wisnu Adrianto and Kathleen Meira Berta discuss urban and spatial planning as an instrument for supporting the developmental goal of Nusantara. Based on their response to a government-sponsored workshop held at the president’s staff office in Jakarta a month after Jokowi announced the relocation of national capital, the authors

warn about the danger of capitalistic modes of development and point to the concerns over the land issues and potential “informal processes” that involve the conflicting interests of actors’ (118). These are problems in Jakarta, so in the section subtitled ‘Not Jakarta’, they hope in Nusantara, ‘planners must engage in thorough planning’ (108). The authors however are not so critical of the disjuncture between the centralistic planning approach and decentralization. Instead, they offer a view from above (through ‘mapping’ and ‘modelling’) to offer a synergistic ‘multiscalar and multisectoral integration’ approach as a way of engaging with multiple stakeholders.

If the planning chapter addresses only vaguely the problems of capitalist modernization, Chapters 6 and 7 deal explicitly with the domination of capitalist political economy and the local resistance to it. Septi Satriani, Pandu Yuhsina Adaba and Imam Syafi’i draw from David Harvey’s work to indicate how capitalism restructures itself by creating new space for investment. For them, the sign of capitalist development is already clear in many forms, from planning processes and institutional arrangements to the exploitation of local natural resources. They identify gaps and contradictions in the regulatory, institutional and financial designs, all of which, they conclude, constitute violations of Indonesia’s Constitution. Finally, they focus on the immediate and long-term impacts of IKN, and the current responses from local communities. The authors’ bottom-up approach (mainly through interviews) teases out various societal positions towards the IKN. The civil societal groups (which include communities’ service organizations – CSOs) largely fall under ‘critically accept’ or ‘outright reject’.

The voices from civil society continue in Chapter 7, in which Deasy Simandjuntak, David Meschede and Michaela Haug offer a nuanced account of responses to the megaproject. They emphasize, more than the previous chapter, the pre-existing unsolved issues of mining and forestry concessions as a consideration for evaluating the problematic position of the IKN. They developed their analysis from materials provided by two CSOs, the AMAN (Indigenous People’s Alliance of the Archipelago) and JATAM (The Mining Advocacy Network), seen as representing voices of civil society. In addition, they offer a perspective from communities in a relatively distanced rural hinterland and the uplands of Borneo who are more ambiguous in their reception towards the IKN. The strength of this chapter lies in the awareness of the rivalry between members of civil society and internal disagreement or conflict within the communities affected by the IKN. It indicates the figures of ‘middlemen’ and ‘brokers’ who benefit from both local peoples and the power group. The existence of such intermediaries shows the profound disconnect between local communities and the government. The authors call for an inclusive IKN approach that is more sensitive to local needs and concerns.

The new city needs residents, but what kind of residents? Meirina Ayumi Malamassam in Chapter 8 takes up this question. She offers a thoughtful demographic analysis of the likelihood of in-migration flows to the IKN. She considers the criteria for civil servants to qualify for the new capital, which include their highest education attainment and performance as well as age. The profiles of the selected civil servants would match the quality of life of the new city, and they would potentially attract further skilled private sector individuals, especially in the field of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. But, as Malamassam points out, this needs to be sustained by a major investment in human capital development (such as world-class tertiary education institutions) and lifestyle industries to make the new capital a magnet for non-civil-servant migrants. Malamassam’s study suggests a formation of certain class of citizens who (by virtue of their education) could accelerate economic growth in the IKN. Yet, we could add another concern that the provision of living amenities and the development of vibrant neighbourhoods for certain class of population also suggests the question of affordability, especially for the local population.

The remaining chapters deal with the governance of resources. Chapter 9, by Dini Suryani, Dian Aulia, Marcellinus Mandira Budi Utomo, outlines the issues of deforestation and the existing poor forest governance, which have made the authors raise doubt about the IKN's proposal for a 'forest city'. The current condition of East Kalimantan forests, after years of exploitation, would worsen with the development of IKN, especially as the essential components that make up the framework for forest governance are either inadequate, vague or unavailable.


The livelihoods of the communities affected by the IKN are superbly presented in Chapter 10 by Rusli Cahyadi, Deny Hidayati, Ali Yansyah Abdurrahim, Temi Indriati Miranda and Ardanareswari Ayu Pitaloka. Sustained by an earlier study by Hidayati in the 1990s on the effects of the transmigration of Javanese people to East Kalimantan in the 1970s, the authors are able to historicize the processes of mutually beneficial socio-economic place-making between the locals and the migrants and how their relations continued to evolve over time even in the context of changing cultivation systems introduced by companies in recent decades. The rapid land acquisition for the IKN has created profound uncertainty and distress among people who live and work in the designated area. It has skyrocketed land values in the region, leading to land freezing and land speculation as well as changes in the social relations between members of the local communities. The discourses around IKN-class smart facilities and infrastructure have also created the idea of difference, which raises the question of whether existing communities living in the area (who wish to keep their livelihood and social life) will be part of the citizenry of the new city. This chapter, filled with sociological data, registers importantly the fact that the IKN is going to be built not so much on the natural (forest or plantation) grounds, but on the land that has long been part of the community's life.

The last chapter, by Lidya Christin Sinaga and Khanisa, intends to frame IKN as representing Indonesia's maritime identity. It focuses on defence and security while indicating the importance of connectivity within the nation and with the supra-national region. By framing the IKN through a maritime perspective, they urge the government to centre geo-political security considerations in the planning of the IKN. This suggests a military base as part of the grand design of IKN. Given that national security and sovereignty are at stake, their suggestion would give even more exceptional power to the central government. Yet it is such power that other chapters seek to question.

Essays in this book offer important information, critiques and suggestions, some of which are sustained by theoretically informed knowledge. In Indonesia, there are many reports and commentaries from various positions about Nusantara; this book manages to gather a collection that will serve as the first reference for both supporters and sceptics to understand as well as engage with this megaproject. If the editors are right that Nusantara 'will define a great part of Indonesia's future trajectory and potentially impact Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific region' (3), this book surely is a must-read for researchers and students, especially those interested in governance and politics of city-building in South East Asia.

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