

---

## Indonesia: The Struggle for Self-Governance

Since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998, a vigorous national struggle for recognition of indigenous rights has found voice in Indonesia. Embodied in the Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN - the Alliance of the Peoples Governed by Custom of the Archipelago), this movement is demanding recognition of the rights of the indigenous peoples to their lands and to self-governance. Based on the constitutional recognition of adat (custom), the movement seeks to restore to the communities the power lost to the State in the centralising reforms of the 1960s and 1970s. As Pak Nazarius, a Kanayatn Dayak from West Kalimantan and Coordinator for AMAN's central region notes:

"Under colonialism Indonesia was colonised but the communities had their freedom. Under independence the country got its freedom but has colonised the communities. National reform must mean giving freedom to the customary communities if it is not to be a continuation of the dictatorship."

AMAN estimates the numbers of those living in communities still governed by custom at anywhere between 60 and 120 million people, out of a national population of 200 million. These peoples claim rights in all or most of the country's forests but in doing so they face formidable obstacles. Under the country's forestry laws, some 70% of the national territory was classified as State Forests under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department. Most of this forest was then leased to logging and plantation companies, which, in name of sustainable forestry, have been denuding the country of its forests at a rate of some 1.2 million hectares per year for the past two decades. That rate has now increased to some 3 million hectares a year according to the national environment organization, WALHI, mainly to feed the voracious appetite of domestic plywood and paper-pulp businesses that can consume 70 million cubic metres of timber a year (more than three times an over-optimistic official estimate of a national sustainable yield of 20 million cubic metres).

Within State Forests all proprietary rights are by definition extinguished, although customary communities may be permitted to harvest some forest products if local companies allow. But outside State forests mechanisms for the recognition of collective rights in land are also effectively denied. AMAN is thus part of a broad civil society movement calling for radical reforms in natural resource management in line with constitutional agreed principles that recognise that the current systems of natural resource jurisdiction and land tenure are major causes of social injustice, conflict and environmental pillage.

National development policies have carved up the indigenous peoples' territories both physically and in terms of overlapping administrative jurisdictions. The peoples, though, want full authority over their lands handed back to them. As Pak Nazarius puts it:

"In my community our understanding is that we have rights to our land and the natural resources both above and below the land. Everything up to sky belongs to us. Several laws and policies have classified our forests as State forests and the minerals as property of the State. We don't see it like that. I have hair on my arm, on my skin. Both are mine. I also own the flesh and bones beneath. They

---

are also mine. No one has the right to take me apart. But the policy has cut these things apart and thus has cut us into pieces. We want the land back whole."

The demands of the indigenous peoples are favoured, to some extent, by the administrative decentralization effected by law in 1999. These reforms have increased the powers of the local political class, on the one hand intensifying pressure on natural resources to generate revenues to pay local administrative costs and line the pockets of officials and local croneys but on the other hand also bringing government nearer to indigenous communities. In South Sulawesi, at indigenous insistence, local laws have been enacted which now recognize the authority of the Toraja people's customary territorial institutions, *lembang*. In West Java, a district law now recognizes the territorial rights of 52 Baduy villages. These reforms presage a sea-change in relations between the State and indigenous peoples, which are likely to play out in very diverse ways, for good and ill, in the 360 or so self-administering districts that now comprise Indonesia.

By: Marcus Colchester, Forest Peoples Programme, e-mail: [marcus@fppwrm.gn.apc.org](mailto:marcus@fppwrm.gn.apc.org)