

# Internal displacement in Indonesia: nation building gone wrong?

*What are the ongoing consequences of the demographic engineering carried out in Indonesia to implement ex-President Suharto's New Order?*

What ideological and political purposes were served by the transmigration policy? How has the presence of transmigrants, mostly from Java, contributed to tensions, conflict, sectarianism and displacement? As current policy reforms promote decentralisation and regional autonomy, can local governments cope with IDPs crises?

Transmigration's goals were to strengthen national security and improve social welfare through opening up new areas of land. The movement of people to outlying parts of the Indonesian archipelago from over-populated Java - and to a lesser extent from the islands of Madura and Bali - was justified in order to promote goals of assimilation and national building. National integration - an obsession of the ruling élites since independence - has resulted in viewing heterogeneity as a threat to national unity.

*Transmigrasi* aroused resentment as local populations found more funds allocated to transmigration settlements than to non-transmigrant areas. Expenditure on road construction, schools, agricultural offices and health facilities was disproportionately concentrated in transmigration areas. Across the archipelago locals resented the extent to which incomers dominated civil service and local business and perceived development projects as benefiting an exploitative central state.

In recent years a series of seemingly intractable conflicts involving separatism, ethnicity and religion have challenged the notion of national sovereignty and the nation state in Indonesia:

- In Irian Jaya/West Papua, migrants concentrated around the site of a major copper mine are in conflict with indigenous people opposed to a project they see as

providing no benefits and as desecrating a sacred site.

- In Christian areas of Flores and West Timor, conflict has flared at alleged outrages against Christianity by Javanese migrants.
- In West and Central Kalimantan, Madurese migrants have been displaced by indigenous Dayaks protesting alienation of the land, forests and rivers on which their livelihoods have traditionally depended.
- In Ambon, ethnic and religious conflicts between local Christians and Butonese Muslim migrants developed into a wider communal conflict which soon spread to other islands in Maluku.
- In Aceh, as in West Papua, the central government has been unable to contain the latent secessionist movement.

The state has been unable to contain the economic downturn which has incapacitated the state's repressive apparatus. Since the demise of the Suharto regime in 1998 the New Order's hegemonic power to forcefully mould and unite the different aspirations of ethnic groups has collapsed as its basic economic foundation could no longer be sustained. Long suppressed latent conflicts have begun to surface. Tensions due to

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economic and political domination over the local populations in the regions are now beyond the state's control. The increasing incidence of return migration to Java, Madura and Bali and the more than one million dislocated persons living in temporary shelters throughout the country demonstrate that pluralism and social cohesion are currently disintegrating in Indonesia.

Tensions and conflicts between migrant and local populations are likely to greatly complicate implementation of new regional autonomy laws - flawed legislation rushed onto the statute books to bolster political support for ex-President Habibie. Amid the confusion, the move towards regional autonomy is at risk of being manipulated by contending local and national political actors and by the army which opposes the process.

Planning for regional development must take a more comprehensive approach in which the achievement of economic welfare should be accompanied by the fulfilment of the political aspirations and human rights of the local people. There is a risk, however, that enhancement of narrow ethno-territorial political identities is incompatible with the process of strengthening democracy and civil society and resolving crises of internal displacement.

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