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Beyond Conflict: Navigating Political and Security Dynamics in Rempang, Riau Islands

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SYNOPSIS

The September 2023 conflict in Rempang in Indonesia's Riau Islands Province vividly illustrates the intricate link between economic advancement, community involvement, and political stability. While concerted efforts by national and local authorities have reinstated security, inadequate attention to some of the community's underlying concerns is likely to affect the restoration of trust and the sustainable advancement of the Rempang Eco-City project. With general elections looming, it is imperative that the governing bodies harmonise economic advancement with community well-being.

COMMENTARY

In the aftermath of the clash between law enforcement and anti-eviction demonstrators in September 2023, apprehensions surfaced concerning the future of Rempang Eco-City's development within Batam in Indonesia's Riau Islands Province. Persistent local resistance and the looming potential for heightened violence threatened project continuity. Environmental advocacy groups advocated for Jakarta's intervention to suspend the proposed glass-producing industrial complex, highlighting its potential detrimental impact on coastal livelihoods and biodiversity. Heightened public scrutiny ensued, specifically directed at the deployment of tear gas and the perceived excessive use of force by the police during the protests.

Three months since the tumultuous events in Rempang, the security landscape in the Batam area shows signs of stabilisation. Both national and local governing bodies diligently undertook measures to de-escalate tensions, dispel prevalent misconceptions within local communities, and actively engage influential stakeholders. The primary objective revolved around expediting the development of Rempang Eco-City and reinstating public confidence in both national and local authorities. Given its designation as a “national strategic project” (proyek strategis nasional/PSN), the uninterrupted progress of foreign investment-backed initiatives in Batam assumes critical significance for national and regional economic advancement, as well as the bolstering of Indonesia's favourable reputation as a destination for international investment.



National and local authorities have been diligent in de-escalating tensions and reinstating security within local communities in the aftermath of clashes over Rempang Eco-City's development in Indonesia's Riau Islands Province in September 2023. Continued political stability and security in the Riau Islands remains a paramount concern for Jakarta. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Tension Mitigation, Clarification, and Communication

In the wake of the demonstrations, the provincial body known as BP Batam (Badan Pengusahaan Kawasan Perdagangan Bebas dan Pelabuhan Bebas Batam), which is entrusted with managing Batam's free trade zone and port, played a pivotal role. BP Batam emerged as a crucial mediator among diverse stakeholders. Headed by Muhammad Rudi, who is also serving as Batam city's mayor, BP Batam orchestrated engagements with local residents via public forums, emphasising several critical points. Firstly, assurances were made regarding equitable compensation for affected coastal communities, ensuring they were given new residences with ownership certificates alongside a 1.2 million IDR (S\$103) monthly stipend. Secondly, Rudi underscored the projected developmental impetus, envisioning the creation of over 300,000 employment opportunities for Batam's youth within the next six decades.

Thirdly, BP Batam officials reiterated the national significance of Rempang Eco-City under the auspices of the central government.

BP Batam, in collaboration with local security authorities, actively engaged traditional community leaders to deliberate on the relocation scheme and the long-term development blueprint for Rempang. These direct consultations aimed to safeguard cultural heritage sites and traditional rights and practices, particularly those pertinent to traditional fishing. Minister of Investment Bahlil Lahadalia, alongside other officials, conducted social assemblies emphasising the socio-economic advantages derived from foreign investment. Recognising the urgency of counteracting the propagation of identity politics, a phenomenon ignited by protester groups during the violent incident in September 2023, the authorities have embarked on initiatives aimed at clarifying misunderstandings and dispelling rumours about the exclusion of some segments of the local community in the development of Rempang Eco-City.

Law enforcement entities, notably the Bareleng Resort Police in Batam, refrained from pursuing additional legal actions against previously detained protesters. Their focus shifted towards restoring public order within the strategically designated project site, emphasising the indispensable role of community cooperation for the success of Rempang Eco-City. Authorities issued warnings against the dissemination of hoaxes and misinformation. However, the actions of police and navy personnel, which were subjected to public scrutiny, prompted calls from national and local NGOs to dismiss Commander Nugroho Tri Nuryanto of the Bareleng Resort Police.

In the subsequent three months, the local administration persistently encouraged residents to formalise their relocation approvals/documents. Notably, the police conducted “door-to-door” informational campaigns on Rempang Eco-City development, aiming to preclude potential provocations culminating in mass protests. High-profile figures from the central government further bolstered this socialisation campaign through multiple visits to Batam, engaging with diverse local stakeholders in technical meetings pertaining to the development plan for Rempang Eco-City.

Moreover, the central government and national parliament assumed pivotal roles in supporting the local administration’s socialisation endeavours and de-escalation initiatives. To fortify Rempang’s infrastructure, the Indonesian parliament [allocated](#) 2.66 trillion IDR (S\$223 million) to BP Batam’s 2024 budget. Rudi highlighted the need for substantial upgrades for the Rempang area, encompassing access roads for resident relocation, essential infrastructure hubs, public amenities, government complexes, and a new port. For its part, the Ministry of Public Works and Housing committed to constructing residences for over 1,300 relocated households in Tanjung Banun.

Riau Islands and the 2024 Elections

Ahead of the upcoming general elections in January 2024, Riau Islands’ regional general elections commission has finalised the [voter list](#) (Daftar Pemilih Tetap/DPT), counting 1,500,974 eligible voters, comprising 753,535 males and 747,439 females. The largest cohort of voters, approximately 38.10%, falls within the “Gen Y/Millennials” category (born between 1981 and 1996). Recent public surveys signal a closely

contested electoral scenario between presidential contenders Anies Baswedan and Prabowo Subianto in Riau Islands.

Indonesia’s General Election Supervisory Agency (Badan Pengawas Pemilu/Bawaslu) measures election vulnerability on four dimensions: social-political, election management, political contestation, and public participation. “Social-political” is defined as any occurrence or event that indicates violence, riot, intimidation and public harm related to election/electoral process; “election management” as any occurrence or event that indicates violation or manipulation of voters’ rights and campaign activities; “political contestation” as any occurrence or event during an electoral campaign that indicates the exclusion of or discrimination against executive/legislative candidates based on gender, ethnicity/tribe, religion and race (this includes the circulation of information or campaign materials that can disrupt the candidates’ campaign, public order and political stability); and “public participation” as an occurrence or event that indicates concerted efforts to obstruct or impede the voting process at polling stations.

The Election Vulnerability Index (Indeks Kerawanan Pemilu/IKP), as published by Bawaslu, categorises Riau Islands Province as possessing a “moderate” level of election vulnerability overall (see Table 1). The province exhibits low vulnerability in the social-political dimension while moderate levels of vulnerability are predicted in election management and political contestation, indicating the potential for political competition to veer towards smear campaigns and the exploitation of identity politics by local candidates. However, in the public participation dimension, high levels of vulnerability are predicted. It is therefore imperative that the regional elections commission, provincial administration, and law enforcement bodies undertake additional measures to forestall voter obstruction and intimidation at polling stations.

Table 1

[Riau Islands’ Election Vulnerability](#)

Dimension of election vulnerability	Score	Status
Social-political	0.00	Low
Election management	60.94	Moderate
Political contestation	33.90	Moderate
Public participation	87.01	High
Overall score	40.33	Moderate

Source: Indonesia’s General Election Supervisory Agency/Bawaslu (2023)

Bawaslu’s study was conducted and disseminated before the disruptive protests in Rempang in September 2023. Although these protests momentarily altered the region’s social fabric, recent endeavours by both central and local governments seem

to have quelled community resistance towards the development of Rempang Eco-City. No concerning indications have surfaced suggesting the exploitation of the Rempang issue by local politicians or candidates.

Nevertheless, the failure of both central and local administrations to fulfil assurances made to Rempang's communities – such as ensuring adequate relocation, access to basic necessities, employment prospects for the younger populace and environmental sustainability – could disrupt the forthcoming general 2024 elections and affect sustained foreign investment flows in future.

Conclusion

Continued political stability and security in the Riau Islands remains a paramount concern for Jakarta. The upheaval in Rempang in September underscores the delicate equilibrium between economic progress and community preservation. While concerted efforts by national and local authorities have reinstated security, the restoration of trust and the sustainable advancement of Rempang Eco-City remain critical. The link between the legitimacy of the impending general elections in Riau Islands and the Rempang issue calls for sincere dedication from governing bodies to fulfil promises made to the communities. Neglecting the concerns of communities not only will jeopardise the tranquillity necessary for an undisturbed electoral process but could also jeopardise foreign investment. The success of Rempang's development pivots on the harmonious fusion of economic advancement, cultural heritage conservation, and steadfast dedication to community welfare.

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