Borderland autonomy and local politics

The national border itself emerges as a site where various forms of power, agency and constraints creatively (and often unequally) interact, rather than a place where state power stands opposed to local aspirations (Walker 2006b:5).

In the previous chapters I discussed how border elites mediated access to resources through long-term patronage relations that involved collaborations with different state authorities (such as the military and district officials) and cross-border associates (Malaysian timber barons). I examined how border elite strategies and networks that have been used during the post-Soeharto period of increased autonomy can be related to the period of border militarization in the 1960s, and, once again, seem to challenge the sovereignty of the Indonesian-Malaysian border. Adding to the complexities of these processes are the ongoing attempts of central government to reclaim authority along the border through large-scheme development programs that, as I will show in this chapter, are yet again met with amplified local claims for increased autonomy. After the logging ban in 2005, the struggle over access to resources has taken a new political turn. While earlier local attempts to claim authority over forest occurred in the twilight between legality and illegality, such claims are now made through intricate political manoeuvring within the legal but ambiguous framework of recent government reform and through state rhetoric of development and security.

In this final chapter, I give further consideration to the unfolding of this dyadic relationship between border elites, border communities and government institutions and their different strategies for negotiating and claiming authority over forest by tracking the fate of a political movement for a new district in this resource-rich border region. This 'border
movement’ directly links to the cases discussed in previous chapters and is the latest attempt to claim border autonomy. The case of re-districting or district splitting (pemekaran) discussed here provides an excellent view of the intricate web of alliances and networks that form the basis of the new and evolving relationship between local actors and the Indonesian government along the border. The chapter further addresses some of the wider implications of these claims for border autonomy.

PROMOTION OF A ‘NORTH BORDER DISTRICT’

Since the early 1990s, an Iban-initiated movement in the border area has pushed for border development and increased local autonomy. Already during the New Order regime border elites had begun formulating ideas about approaches to dealing with the chronic underdevelopment of the border area. However, until after the fall of Soeharto, this movement remained rather quiescent, as efforts to increase local autonomy were not given much leeway to effect change under the highly authoritarian New Order regime. The rhetoric of this emerging movement was therefore mostly centred on practical questions of development while issues of increased autonomy were largely downplayed (Kuyah 1992).

Post New Order, this movement has gained momentum and re-emerged as a local response or counter-movement against the increase in outside involvement in what are perceived as local matters. By creating their own district, the border elite expects to boost local autonomy and strengthen their control of local forestlands (Equator News 2006d). They further anticipate that controlling border access will become an important political and economic resource in the near future, as enhanced commercial exchange is expected to develop between the two bordering regions of West Kalimantan and Sarawak (Equator News 2005h).

One unintended outcome of the early decentralization laws was the sudden rise of many new districts throughout the nation. Law No. 22/1999 on regional autonomy opened up the possibility of dividing existing districts into smaller ones. As stipulated in Government Regulation No. 129/2000, proposals for new districts must be able to demonstrate a capacity for regional autonomy.¹ The viability of a new

¹ The procedures and criteria in Regulation No. 129/2000 are being amended in parliament.
district is measured in terms of its economic capacity, regional potential, population size and land area. The government's justification for creating new districts assumes that such processes reflect the genuine aspirations of the people, and that the smaller administrative units will bring the government closer to the people and create new economic opportunities (Fitrani et al. 2005). These expectations have led to a rush to create new districts in Kalimantan and all over Indonesia. Portrayed as a bottom-up process in which common people can gain a larger degree of empowerment and transparency in local government matters, district-splitting became immensely popular in Indonesia. The numbers of new districts rose dramatically from 292 in 1998 to 483 in early 2007 (ICG 2007). Law No. 22/1999, which was hastily drawn up in the early days of decentralization, has since been revised and superseded by the more restrictive Law No. 32/2004, which, among other things, raised the minimum number of subdistricts to be included in a new district from three to five. This tightening was an attempt to slow down the process of re-districting. Since 1999, several large Kalimantan districts bordering Malaysia have been subdivided. The establishment of these new, often Dayak-dominated districts has largely been dictated by ethnic politics and greater access to local resources. For example, in 1999 in West Kalimantan, the large border district of Sambas was split into Sambas and Bengkayang district; and in East Kalimantan, the resource-rich district of Bulungan was split into the districts of Bulungan, Malinau and Nunukan (Tanasaldy 2007; Wollenberg et al. 2006).

Offically, the process is known as pemekaran, or ‘blossoming’, but in reality the pemekaran process is a complex affair involving intricate political manoeuvrings. Successful re-districting has largely been dependent on the ability to draw on a broad network ranging across all administrative levels of government and considerable financial backing (Vel 2007:93). More often than not, the driving force behind pemekaran is the urge to gain authority over various resources rather than the establishment of more accountable local governments (Roth 2007:146). The economic incentives of large financial transfers from the central government to support new districts, and lucrative positions in the new administration, have undoubtedly been an important motivator for local elites. The

---

2 Pemekaran not only refers to the splitting of districts but also to other levels of administrative fragmentation like the creation of new provinces, subdistricts, villages, and hamlets (Kimura 2007; Roth 2007).
decentralization laws (No. 22/1999 and No. 32/2004) stipulate that new districts will receive subsidies in form of both general allocation funds (*dana alokasi umum*) and special allocation funds (*dana alokasi khusus*) from the central government. In the case discussed here, the prime motivator has been the struggle for a larger share of benefits from forest resources and future border trade.

In 2000, in the heyday of decentralization, the Iban elite initiated the first preliminary and official steps in the creation of a new district. A group lobbying for the creation of a new district was set up, but progress was quickly disrupted by the booming timber business and consequent growth in the local economy. Only several years later, after the logging adventure came to an abrupt end and the region was once again plunged into economic depression, was there renewed interest in the possible formation of a new district.

The overall goals have been to develop and ensure the common good of the border communities. Although virtually everyone I interviewed in the five subdistricts in 2007 passively supported the idea of a new district, there was also widely expressed concern about the question of whether the border elite would work to benefit all levels of society if a new district were created. The border elites’ history of conspicuous consumption and individual enrichment, coupled with collusion with various government agents, is the prime reason for these reservations. Compared to the elite and their multiple networks, most non-elite Iban are largely tied to life in the border hills and dependent on the remaining forest resources and cross-border labour migration. Moreover, that same elite had acted as brokers between local communities, the district government, and the Malaysian timber barons during the recent logging boom.

This is not to say that all members among the border elite necessarily approach the *pemekaran* process and its future possible benefits solely with their own enrichment in mind. Since the major crackdown on logging activities, which has plunged the area into economic depression affecting all layers of local society, the importance of a genuine bottom-up process and local unity in the interests of full development of the area has been continually emphasized. Despite past efforts of the elite to monopolize access to resources, the overall benefits of a new district would certainly trickle down and affect the life of ordinary people. Without the personal networks and political expertise of the elite, it would be impossible to bring the new district into existence.
The leading members of the movement are primarily ethnic Iban; the two other ethnic groups that inhabit the area, the Maloh and Melayu, also support the movement, but their minority status makes them less influential. The core members are all part of the small but prominent ‘traditional’ elite discussed in the previous chapter: traditional Iban leaders like temenggong, patih, panglima perang, and village headmen (tuai rumah). Besides these, the movement includes members of the district assembly (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah, DPRD II), district government officials, and a small handful of Jakarta-based supporters. The movement further draws on the support of a group of young, educated but unemployed men, who dream of the many new jobs to be created by a new district administration.

Due to the historical processes discussed in the previous chapters, members of this elite have managed to strengthen their power by gaining access to various political networks within the government administration and powerful business alliances. With the assistance of these networks, some of these traditional leaders have themselves become local business figures. Others have pursued influence through involvement in local politics as party politicians or local government officials. For example, a small handful of prominent local figures have become elected members of the district assembly in Putussibau, giving them a front row position from which to influence decisions made on the district level concerning their own constituencies along the border. The border movement is learning from the experience of other border district splits in the province, especially the subdivision of Sambas district into Bengkayang and Sambas districts in 1999. The head of the border district movement is a highly educated Iban (originally from the study area) who now holds an influential government position as head of a district-level office (kepala dinas) in one of these recently created districts mentioned above. Having a good vantage point from which to observe the success of these new districts and the complicated political processes involved with pemekaran,

---

3 Issues of interethnic distrust between the Maloh and Melayu and the dominant Iban group play into the dynamics of this movement and will be discussed below.

4 The Jakarta supporters include a few researchers from University of Indonesia and civil servants from central state ministries like the Ministry of Agriculture (Departemen Pertanian) and Ministry of National Education (Departemen Pendidikan). The West Kalimantan representatives of the Regional Representative Council have also promised their support for the new district (Equator News 2006d).

5 Law No. 10/1999.
he initiated the border movement together with a small group of other well-educated Iban men.

The movement further feeds into a larger alliance of border communities known as the ‘Forum for Border Community Care’ positioned in the provincial capital, Pontianak. This forum was created in 2004 with the purpose of lobbying for and promoting the overall development of the border regions of West Kalimantan; its members are from all the ethnic groups living along entire length of the border.\(^6\) The head of this forum is also a prominent Iban from one of the five border subdistricts. So far, the forum has mainly been used by the border movement as a meeting place for consolidating new alliances, especially with provincial government officials and politicians. All the founding members of the movement originate from the border area, but they live and work in or near the provincial capital and only seldom visit the border area. One prominent Pontianak-based supporter of the movement is the former *bupati* of Kapuas Hulu, Jacobus Layang, mentioned previously. In 2006, Layang published a book (his MA thesis) on the implications of underdevelopment in the border area, criticizing the lack of central government commitment in developing the border communities (Layang 2006). Layang was also one of actors who had a stake in the plantation company PT Plantana Razindo operating along the border in early 2000. As I will detail below, all core players in the border movement have complex positions in relation to each other and within their own communities.

After numerous meetings and discussions, in early March 2007 representatives and supporters from the five subdistricts (approximately 400 people) met with the *bupati* at an official gathering in the district office in Putussibau. A committee known as the ‘Committee for the Establishment of the North Border District’ (*Panitia Pembentukan Kabupaten Perbatasan Utara, PPKPU*), which was the main organization pursuing the formation of the new district, boldly proclaimed the new district name as ‘The North Border District’ (Kabupaten Perbatasan Utara). At the same time, they presented a final report of several hundred pages containing the legally stipulated requirements for a new district and signatures of all local (elite) supporters (*Equator News* 2007e). This report, which emphasized the considerable potential of the border area and its current underdevelopment, was the outcome of an unof-

\(^6\) Forum Peduli Masyarakat Perbatasan Kalimantan Barat (FPMP).
The movement had carried out an extensive lobbying campaign. In February 2006, it sent out its first formal letter of aspiration (surat aspirasi masyarakat) to the bupati, presenting the plan for a new district. To give the letter an extra touch of formality, the name of the proposed district was stamped on the letterhead in large black type. Then, in late 2007, the committee attempted to precipitate the pemekaran process (Equator News 2007). It was well aware that rapid progress on the establishment of the new district was imperative, given the looming national election and the new government border act mentioned earlier. The outcome of the general elections in 2009 could mean that the movement would have to begin the lobbying process and alliance-making all over again, as old parliamentary allies might be replaced and a new president elected. Furthermore, from the middle of 2008, members of parliament would be too busy campaigning for their respective parties to push for the subdivision of the district.

With the disappointments of failed efforts of the past in mind, the border movement has been eager to push on. Early in the presidency of Megawati (2001-2004), the same border elite had applied to the central government to be recognized as a special authority region (otorita daerah khusus) and thereby receive favourable conditions such as free border trade and a higher degree of political autonomy (in line with the status of Batam). According to leading movement members, a letter of decree (surat keputusan) that would have granted special authority to the border area (otorita perbatasan) was being prepared, but then in 2004 a new president was elected and the decree was supposedly postponed. A few days before President Megawati left office in October 2004, she signed the revised decentralization legislation, Law No. 32/2004, that replaced the former law from 1999. This new law states the requirements for creating a special administrative zone (kawasan khusus) in an area within a district or province of special importance for national interest. This autonomous zone would enjoy the status of a free trade zone (Law No. 32/2004, chapter II, part 2, article 9). During the Megawati presidency the government prepared a development strategy for the Kalimantan border region, and according to the members of the movement the change in the central administration turned out to be a significant setback for the lobbying efforts of the border movement at the time (Bappenas 2003).
In a 2007 statement outlining the urgency of the current campaign, a Badau-based committee member said,

We need to push forward now and keep going (jalan terus). We cannot wait for official approval from the district office. Government regulations as they look today may be different tomorrow so we need to act while there is still an opportunity (peluang).  

However, the most crucial task is to forestall the possible government suspension of all district-splitting discussed in parliament. This moratorium was proposed by the president in 2007 and was based on his strong criticism of the general lack of fiscal capacity of new regions to look after themselves (Jakarta Post 2007b, 2007c). The huge popularity of pemekaran throughout Indonesia has put immense strain on the central government’s resources and budget, while outcomes in the form of improved services for the majority of people have so far been meagre. Meanwhile, corruption and nepotism have reportedly increased, a development that the central government is largely blaming on self-interested regional elites. Such accusations have fostered widespread protest from provincial and district assembly members who accuse the central government of being arrogant and not committed to the development of the outer regions and the re-allocation of promised economic benefits from the centre to its margins (Pontianak Post 2007b).

JUSTIFICATION FOR A NEW DISTRICT

The first step in the pemekaran process as stipulated in the government laws and regulations is a demonstration of the viability of a proposed new district and justification of the need for its creation. As indicated by the name ‘The North Border District’, the PPKPU committee clearly specified the common ground and key resources of the five subdistricts involved. Despite its vast natural resources, the border area, after more than 60 years of Indonesian independence, is still categorized as a region of extreme poverty (daerah tertinggal) with insufficient infrastructure, health services and education facilities (KNPDT 2007). As proclaimed

---

7 Personal interview, Badau, 20-3-2007.
by participants during an August 2006 borderland ‘awareness-raising’ meeting (rapat sosialisasi perbatasan) in Badau that was held to discuss the advantages of redistricting:

It has now been 63 years since we became an independent nation (63 tahun kita sudah merdeka) but our roads are still yellow [dirt] and at night, our lamps are still dark. Is this the result of independence (apakah ini hasil kemerdekaan)? [A chorus of voices from the crowd replied], ‘We still live in misery and poverty. Development has left us behind’ (PPKPU 2007).

The main argument put forward for splitting the Kapuas Hulu district was its sheer size and lack of capacity to develop its outer subdistricts. The ‘mother’ district (kabupaten induk) consists of no less than 23 subdistricts spread over 29,842 km² (20.33 percent of West Kalimantan) with a population of only 209,860 (Kabupaten Kapuas Hulu 2006). As Nanang, an ex-DPRD member and one of the spokesmen of the committee, stated:

Geographically the district is too large. It is like a piece of bread we break here and there (kita pecah sini, pecah sana). In the end, each subdistrict only gets a little piece. Eventually it will starve…. Nothing has changed in the border area since independence; there is no meaningful advancement (tidak ada suatu kemajuan yang sangat berarti). The roads are still those gravel roads made by Apheng. There is no other development planning; there is nothing. Well, seeing things like that, some people then have gathered together and encouraged the promotion of a new border district.8

Members of the border committee stressed the fact that past and current district administrations had not succeeded in developing the border area compared to other areas in the district. As a result, they said, the border people were forced to act by themselves if any changes were to take place:

Until now the border communities have just been a tool (dijadikan alat saja bagi pemerintah) of the government in extracting natural resources, that is why the community wants their own autonomy (otonomi sendiri), to take

8 Personal interview, Lanjak, 2-3-2007.
control by themselves, and at least have their own district. Because the natural resources are abundant (sumberdaya alam melimpah).9

As leading members of the committee announced to a local newspaper, a new border district would come to reflect the true aspirations of local border communities (Akcaya 2007b).

Applying the government rhetoric of defence, security and development, and emphasizing the role of border inhabitants as loyal citizens, were another conscious strategy among the movement members in attaining government good will for their cause. The members proclaimed that the creation of a new border district was a local effort to maintain a unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI); as enhanced political and economic autonomy would prevent acts of separatism among the border communities. Furthermore, the border district would become the new, bright, outward face of Indonesia towards Malaysia and, most importantly, would improve national defence and guarantee security (Equator News 2006a). The movement members were quick to disavow in public past so-called ‘illegal’ activities in the border area and to claim that such activities were the act of desperate people and solely in response to a long-standing economic disparity along border. The only way to prevent any further illegal activities and enhance national loyalty was to involve border communities in developing the area through engagement in local-level politics and economic affairs. As stated by an Iban district assembly member on the motives behind a new district,

We do not want the central government to think ‘danger’; what are the politics of the border people in creating a district. We are Indonesian. We continue to love Indonesia (cinta Indonesia). However, what we want is a change and advancement of the border area. That is our argument and motivation behind a new Border District.10

Numerous news reports touching upon the issue of national loyalty among the West Kalimantan borderland population have appeared in the national press, expressed in headlines such as: ‘Communities living along the Kalimantan-Sarawak border are still isolated within their

---

9 Personal interview, Lanjak, 1-3-2007.
10 Personal interview, Putussibau, 13-3-2007.
own country’ (Masyarakat perbatasan Kalimantan-Sarawak terasing di Negerinya sendiri) (Kompas 2000f). More often than not, the Iban population is presented as a vivid case of this borderland dilemma. Such a depiction highlights isolation, underdevelopment and cross-border ethnicity as the main reasons for cross-border solidarity and subsequent lack of national consciousness. As expressed in the headlines of the main provincial newspaper: ‘The border citizens still rely on Malaysia’ (Warga perbatasan masih harapkan Malaysia) (Pontianak Post 2005g). The border communities are still seen as a national security threat because of their strong cross-border ties.

**SEPARATISM: PLAYING THE BORDER CARD**

Movement members may have officially proclaimed their strong national loyalty in local news media, but during the heated debates in local meetings, becoming part of Malaysia was often mentioned as a final option. The Iban generally accepted their status as Indonesian citizens, and everybody knew that secession was impossible, but the threat clearly indicated the preparedness of the committee to play the ‘border card’ in political negotiations with the district and central governments. Even fears of local Iban separatism have been expressed as a possible future outcome of such special borderland circumstances.11 As an excited Iban supporter from Badau announced,

> We will just join (bergabung) Malaysia. We will organize training over there and rebel (berontak saja). We will still try the nice way first (cara-cara bagus) but if official procedures turn out to be unworkable, well, what can we do? We will get help from smart people in Malaysia, [from the] Iban people there.12

During the Dutch colonial period in Indonesia, Raja Brooke, the Sarawak ruler at the time, offered the Iban border population the opportunity to join the much larger Iban population across the border in Sarawak, al-

---

12 Personal interview, Lanjak, 21-3-2007.
though such offers never resulted in concrete action.13 ‘We are all related (kami semoa kaban)’ is a common statement made when talking about the ‘Iban cousins’ on the other side of the border. The historical cross-border relations and ongoing, mostly rhetorical support from small segments of the Iban population in Sarawak definitely boost local Iban confidence. As one committee member commented during a local meeting, ‘We can make things very difficult for them (district and provincial officials)’, referring to former acts of vigilantism and close ethnic ties to the Iban in Sarawak. Despite these statements, the speakers always stressed that everything they did would have to conform to the law (Law No. 32/2004), and that they should not attempt to win some sort of independence like Aceh. No attempt should be made to disturb the stability of the border (stabilitas perbatasan).14 On the question of what would possibly happen if the border communities were not given increased autonomy and their own district, an Iban temenggong answered:

If the border area (daerah perbatasan) is not allowed to emerge as a new district by the central or local government, I am afraid that many of the communities would lose the faith (kepercayaan) in the unity of NKRI and want to separate themselves or break away (berpisah) to Malaysia. If you ask the community, 99 percent would prefer to be under the political control of Malaysia, and that would put the unity of NKRI in danger. Well, older people like us try to protect the unity of the Indonesian nation by suggesting the creation of a new district instead of separatism.15

ETHNIC SENTIMENTS

United we are strong (bersama kita teguh), as one we struggle for the development of the border region in Kapuas Hulu, West Kalimantan. In numbers, we will actualize the formation of the Northern Border District that we jointly desire (inginkan bersama) (PPKPU 2007:213).

---

13 See Letter to Nederlands-Indie Governor-General s’Jacob from Charles Brooke, 25-9-1882, Mailrapport No. 1066, Ministerie van Koloniën, ARA [TransRW].
14 By promoting district autonomy, the founders of the decentralization process hoped to prevent acts of separatism that eventually could break up the country (Aspinall and Fealy 2003a:4).
15 Personal interview, Embaloh Hulu, 13-6-2007.
The above quotation taken from the PPKPU charter is the official motto of the movement and clearly shows the importance of unity among the various ethnic groups inhabiting the borderland. The promotion of a common border identity, as a medium for popular mobilization of the local communities, is clearly an attempt to downplay the question of ethnicity, which could end up becoming a major source of conflict and split the movement. In other parts of Indonesia, pemekaran is often carried out along ethnic lines, which in many cases has resulted in violent conflicts (Duncan 2007). Yet, despite these attempts to ignore ethnicity, the issue is definitely an important one. For example, during local meetings some Iban members made jokes about the movement being called the Free Iban Movement (Gerakan Iban Merdeka, GIM), seeing it primarily as a movement for Iban revitalization. The reference here is to the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) in North Sumatra. Among some members, such jokes express the dreams of promoting Iban adat authority and reclaiming control of what they perceive as their traditional territory, now claimed by other ethnic groups. Later, during the same meeting, Iban members changed the acronym GIM to GBM (Gerakan Bersama Maju) or Together We Prosper Movement and thereby downplayed the issue of ethnicity.

Although they do not express their concerns openly within the movement, the much smaller groups of Maloh and Melayu certainly have their reservations about these aspirations on the part of the Iban. The prospect of a large local Iban majority has profound implications for them, especially with regard to competition over political power and resources. In fact, there is a long history of confrontation between Maloh and Iban communities, going back to pre-colonial times of tribal warfare (King 1976a, 1976b). As both groups have moved around extensively in the last several hundred years, community boundaries have blurred and are continually being renegotiated (Wadley 2002b). Today Maloh communities have generally become isolated in small pockets surrounded by the much larger Iban communities, usually with little opportunity for expansion. Furthermore, since independence, in contrast to the Iban, the Maloh have embraced formal education on a much larger scale, resulting in a generally higher level of education and greater access to jobs in government administration. The Iban communities were traditionally very resistant to the preaching of the early Christian Capuchin missionaries and, compared to the Maloh, they felt no need
to convert. Therefore they forfeited the benefit of missionary schooling. These factors make both sides fearful of each other. The Maloh are afraid that the Iban majority will outmanoeuvre them by force of numbers, while the Iban fear that being less educated and holding fewer government positions, they will be subject to Maloh encroachment on land where they claim customary rights of access as Maloh officials channel benefits towards their own kin and communities. Despite this interethnic rivalry, the various groups realize that for the movement to succeed, the five subdistricts must at least officially appear as one ‘border community’. Therefore, such concerns remain veiled, even as tension continues to build along accentuated ethnic lines. During fieldwork in 2007, there were several cases of land disputes, mainly between the Iban and the Maloh. These cases were largely triggered by the existing climate of uncertainty regarding central government plans for the border area, in particular the potentially lucrative outcomes of land ownership in the immediate border area, were it to become a centre of official cross-border commerce between the two countries.

MULTIPLE LEVELS OF POWER STRUGGLE

After popular mobilization, the next step in the pemekaran process is to secure the approval of all government administrative levels. Approval is needed from the district assembly, the bupati, the provincial assembly, the governor, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Indonesian national parliament, and finally the president. This part of the process can be extremely expensive and time-consuming, and extensive lobbying is required. The pemekaran process requires the ability to draw on multiple networks at all levels of government. During an interview, a member of the border committee emphasized that large bribes have to be paid in order to gain support from provincial and central parliamentarians. One of the committee members’ main activities has been raising the needed cash for lobbying and for transport back and forth between the different levels of government administration. Committee members have used their own savings to keep the process running.

The movement quickly experienced its first problems when approaching the district office, despite the initial go-ahead from the district assembly following a successful lobbying campaign the previous year.
On 20 April 2006, approximately 100 people representing the five sub-districts met with members of the district assembly in Putussibau. The representatives were greeted positively, and the assembly subsequently issued a letter of decree supporting the formation of a new district in the border area (KepDPRD 2006). Before issuing this decree a handful of district assembly members originating from the border area had carried out intensive lobbying within the assembly.

On the surface, the bupati of Kapuas Hulu, Abang Tambul Husin, also initially appeared to be supportive of the idea of a new district, attending meetings and personally donating funds to the border committee. Nevertheless, he also seemed to be deliberately stalling the process. Like the bupati in other resource-rich districts, he has, since the outset of decentralization, become a ‘small king’ (raja kecil) who has consolidated his power and support through income from natural resources.

Informal interviews with district government officials in Putussibau produce a picture of a general, although not publicly expressed, worry within the bupati office that the existing district risks losing major income from strategic resources such as timber and the future lucrative border trade if it is split. In the budget for the period 2008-2009 the district Department of Plantations and Forestry in Kapuas Hulu planned to use no less than Rp 41.3 billion to development of the forestry and plantation sector in the border area (Perhut Kapuas Hulu 2007). The law further requires the mother district to support the new district economically for the first few years before the new district receives its own fiscal transfers from the central government. The creation of the ‘North Border District’ could further end up isolating the mother district, which is already the most remote district in the province. Besides the five border subdistricts studied, an additional nine subdistricts in Kapuas Hulu are planning to make their own district, to be known as Kabupaten Sentarum. If these two new districts are created, the mother district will be geographically

16 During a previous gathering, the bupati personally donated Rp 20 million (US$2,200) to the border committee (Akcaya 2007a).

17 Tambul Husin faces several allegations of corruption. During the logging boom, the Provincial Forestry Agency accused the bupati of withholding Forest Resource Provision funds (Provisi Sumber Daya Hutan, PSDH) and Reforestation Funds (Dana Reboisasi, DR) amounting to Rp 150 billion (US$17 million). District courts have not yet found enough convincing evidence of these allegations to push the issue further, despite charges filed by the provincial prosecutor’s office back in 2004. Husin allegedly did not deposit PSDH/DR fees in the minister of forestry’s account but directly transferred the fees to regional accounts and later to a personal account (Rinaldi et al. 2007).

18 ‘Sentarum’ refers to the shallow lakes at the base of the border hills.
and possibly economically isolated in the most northern corner of the province. The sheer distance to the provincial capital, more than 700 km away, makes border access highly important for the local economy, as Sarawak economic centres across the border are much closer than the provincial capital.

There are numerous reasons why the bupati office may seek to stall the pemekaran process. However, the core issue, according to an Iban committee member, is to maintain control of the resource-rich border region:

Now we are actually able to fulfil the requirements for creating a new district put forward by central government, but the mother district seems to be hesitant about letting us go. It keeps holding on to our tail (ekor dipegang). There is too much potential so they cannot let go and let the new district emerge. For example, the territorial boundary of the five subdistricts still encompasses an abundance of valuable timber, as well as two large national parks (Betung Kerihun and Danau Sentarum) and the north-bound national highway (Jalan Lintas Utara), which connects the district to the border post in Badau. It will be difficult for the mother district to let the five subdistricts go; it needs our rich natural resources to cover its expenses. I think if Putussibau lets the border area become a district, Putussibau will die. If the head of the district refuses to give his recommendation, then the Governor will not either, and that is it.19

However, during the campaign for the 2005 district election (Pilkada), the bupati was re-elected for a five-year period (2005-2010) by promising the five border subdistricts larger autonomy on local forest issues and general infrastructure development. Since the revision of the law on regional autonomy in 2004, district heads have been voted into office by direct popular elections and not by the district legislative assembly as was done previously. District heads are therefore more dependent on popular sentiment for re-election than before (Buehler 2007). An outright rejection of a new border district could make dealings along the border more difficult and possibly mean loss of support from the border population on whom the bupati is partly dependent for maintaining his authority in this remote part of the district. Until now, however, the bupati office has managed to keep the most critical voices at bay by contributing minor funding for the

19 Personal interview, Badau, 19-3-2007.
border movement while at the same time prolonging the bureaucratic process involved in the proposed split. Several Iban and Maloh inhabitants interviewed in the border subdistricts further expressed their lack of confidence in the *bupati*; they believed that he, being a Malayu, was more accommodating towards the needs of the Melayu than towards that of the other ethnic groups in the district. When Tambul Husin initially was elected *bupati* in 2000, his election met with local protest. He was accused of bribing certain district assembly members to cast their votes for him (*Jakarta Post* 2000d).

**NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKS OF INFLUENCE**

In her research on *pemekaran* processes in West Sumba, Jacqueline Vel shows how multiple networks link the regions with the centre and demonstrates the importance of these networks in border elite projects (Vel 2007:93). These often very personalized networks that link the border movement to regional networks at the district and province level appear much stronger than those with the centre in Jakarta. For example, the district office is required to carry out an official feasibility study of the border area, which is to be handed over to the governor’s office before the pemekaran process can proceed to the Ministry of Home Affairs in Jakarta. The finalising of this study has been postponed several times. The slow progress on the study has made the border movement impatient, and it has led them to present their own feasibility report directly to members of parliament without the blessing of the district or the province. By circumventing the lower levels of government and lobbying directly with national parliamentarians, they hope to speed up the entire process.

Such acts of defiance have only been possible with the help of a small group of supporters in Jakarta (various academics, former military officers and NGOs) who in preceding years had established contacts with various national parliament members. However, several committee members were somewhat sceptical about the prospects for success of such an endeavour because they saw these Jakarta networks as the

---

20 See also Ehito Kimura and his discussion of elite politics within *pemekaran* processes in Sulawesi, where what he refers to as vertical coalitions, or elite alliances, span different administrative levels and connect centre and periphery (Kimura 2006).
At the edges of states

weakest link in the campaign. None of the Jakarta supporters possessed
the necessary power or capital for effective lobbying. The former allies
among the military officers stationed along the border in the 1970s were
now pensioners and less powerful in the current political climate. The
chronic lack of funding also put an effective constraint on the move-
ment’s negotiating power among national parliamentarians. Although
old military alliances in Jakarta may be dwindling, the regional military
command has, according to movement members, expressed its support
of a new district. Several movement meetings were attended, although
passively by military officers. According to a movement member, military
interest in the new district is dual. First, if a new district is realized it
would be entitled to erect a new district military command (Kodim) and
thereby the military would be able to further consolidate its presence in
the area. Second, the new district would become one of the main trade
zones with Malaysia or, as stated in the interview, the door to the border
(pintu perbatasan).

In fact, one leading member of the movement declared that a more
effective step in lobbying would be to send a delegation of border com-
munity leaders to Jakarta in order to allow them to present their cause
directly to the national parliament and the president and to display their
military decorations as proof of their loyal service to the republic. This
suggestion was inspired by the strategy and success of the Papuans, who
appeared before the parliament and openly stated their demands for
regional autonomy. An Iban member of the border movement com-
mented, ‘We fought during the communist era to defend the new repub-
lic. Many people suffered and died. Now we are left behind, forgotten
(ditinggalkan, dilupakan) just like that. That is how we feel’.

Transnational networks add to the complexity of this case. During
the many local meetings about the new border district several Malaysian
‘investors’ from across the border attended, along with some Malaysian
Chinese and Iban. Many of these ‘investors’ were also involved in the
logging boom that ended in 2005. Economic support from wealthy
Malaysians could end up being a key factor in realizing the establish-
ment of the new district. Even more importantly, cross-border resources may
make the new district less dependent on central government politics and
financial support. As indicated by an Iban businessman from Lanjak,

---
21 Personal interview, Badau, 19-3-2007.
22 Personal interview, Putussibau, 13-3-2007.
‘If we already had a new district here, many smart [Iban] people from Malaysia would come and invest their money in plantations and so on. There are plenty of them waiting across the border. But for now, they do not want to come, as they do not trust the government’.23

These comments are symptomatic of widespread mistrust of government authorities and of the conviction that they (the border communities) would be better off handling things themselves. During fieldwork, I often confronted the general assumption that distant provincial and national centres do not comprehend the special circumstances of life in the borderland.

By the very act of inviting Malaysian businessmen to their meetings the movement put subtle pressure on the central government to disclose its plans for the border area, particularly its forest resources. Negotiating directly with cross-border business connections as they had done in the past, local communities once again showed their ability to take things into their own hands. The current uncertainty about the central government’s plans has made both Indonesian and Malaysian investors hesitant about investing in the area, exacerbating the economic depression that has existed since the logging stopped. Local communities and elites are eager to get the economy up and running. One way of venting their frustration over the lack of clear commitment from the centre is to push forward independently by calling on their own long-term connections to Malaysian entrepreneurs.

At the time of writing, the border movement was still awaiting a formal response to their request for a new district. When I left the borderland in August 2007 the outcomes seemed as uncertain as ever and highly dependent on rapid political changes taking place locally and nationally and on the readiness of higher-level authorities to take action. The future of the pemekaran process very much depended on the good will of key politicians in Jakarta and of local government administrative heads like the bupati and governor, who have their own, often divergent, agendas for the border area. The bupati of Kapuas Hulu, together with four other district heads, is involved in yet another pemekaran process. These five district heads wish to split from the current province of West Kalimantan and create a new province, Kapuas Raya’. What effects this plan may have on the future of the border district was still too early

to forecast, but all available district resources seemed directed towards carrying out this grand plan for some kind of new province (*Kalimantan Review* 2008).

Although it is still too early to draw conclusions, I envisage several possible outcomes of the pemekaran process and the more general struggle over forest resources discussed in this chapter. First, in late November 2007 a new governor was elected in West Kalimantan. The new governor, Cornelis-Christianty Sanjaya, former bupati of Landak, is himself a Dayak or ‘son of the soil’ (*putra daerah*) as he often proclaimed during his campaign for the governorship. Before the election, and as part of his campaign, Cornelis attended meetings in Pontianak and showed his support for the border movement, in return expecting that the border population would send their votes his way. During a highly publicized April 2007 seminar initiated by the ‘Forum for Border Community Care’, primarily led by the Iban elite, Cornelis announced publicly that if elected governor he would do his utmost to develop the economy of the border area (*Equator News* 2007d). This strong new ally in the highest administrative post in the province may put the needed pressure on the district head in Kapuas Hulu to take the pemekaran process to the next level. However, such strong support from the governor might have come too late, given the proposed national moratorium on district splitting. During an interview in late 2007, the head of the provincial legislative assembly (Ketua Komisi A, DPRD) in Pontianak expressed strong doubts as to whether a new border district would have any chance of being approved at the central level. According to him, one of the major hurdles is the low population density. With only about 30,000 inhabitants, the proposed border district would be too sparsely populated to survive on its own. He estimated that it might take another five to ten years before that border population could be ready to manage its own district.

In the heated debate about the viability of many new districts in recent years, some commentators, national and regional, have suggested that the central government should prioritize the establishment of new districts and provinces in regions with special needs such as underdeveloped and sensitive state border areas. This, they argue, would be in line with one of the original ideas behind decentralization, namely that of facilitating and ensuring national unity. Already in 2004 the National

---

24 Sanjaya is the second Dayak governor to take office since 1960.
Development Planning Agency suggested that district splitting might be a sensible way to make the development effort more efficient in the thinly populated border region (Bappenas 2004:76). In addition, the central government has been hesitant and vague regarding its plans for the border regions. As indicated in reports in several news media, the central government’s plans to introduce a border law will not necessarily involve an increase in local autonomy, but more likely would foster the reclaiming of central authority over these resource-rich peripheral regions. In recent years, the central government has expressed reservations about the rapidity with which authority and funds are being transferred to the districts, arguing that the results are mixed and often lead to communal conflict and rampant rent-seeking among political elites, while the benefits for ordinary citizens are less obvious.26 As indicated in this study, these reservations about central authority have been most obvious in the borderland through an increase in militarization and strict control over the utilization of the border’s extensive natural resources.

The pemekaran case discussed in this final chapter once again demonstrates the complexity of relations between local communities and the various levels of government bureaucracy. It constitutes a concrete example of how border elites over time have attempted to negotiate authority over resources along the border. Furthermore, the chapter argues that such negotiations are carried out through the appropriation of the state rhetoric of development for local purposes and (personal) interests, while at the same time cross-border connections and trade are used to resist government authority, thus challenging its sovereignty and power.

Although it is uncertain whether the border movement discussed in this chapter will succeed, the border elite will continue to exploit opportunities presented by decentralization and the duality of life along the border in order to negotiate authority and attempt to strengthen their position. The alliances formed or renewed during the pemekaran process will, despite the process’ uncertain outcome, feed into local elite networks of influence. The struggle over access to resources will be waged between such border elite movements, district officials and central government agencies in the borderland in the years to come. An authority such as the pemekaran phenomenon suggests a complex relationship between state and local control that helps shed light on the often ambivalent relation-

---

26 Jakarta Post 2007b; Pontianak Post 2007b, 2007c; Suara Karya 2007b.
ship between border populations in Kapuas Hulu and their state as well as the more general processes of state formation taking place along the edges of the Indonesian nation-state. Honest attempts are being made by certain resourceful segments of the border population to attract the attention of highly placed politicians to the chronic underdevelopment experienced by the majority of the inhabitants of the immediate border area. However, despite such good intentions, behind the scenes a mounting struggle for access to resources is exposing old sentiments and alliances often consolidated along ethnic lines.