New colonizers?
Identity, representation and government in the post-New Order Mentawai Archipelago

Sedang bicarakan situasi politik di kepulauan ini […] boleh dibilang bisnis seperti biasa. Dulu kami digigit kucing, sekarang digigit anjing, rasa sakitnya sama aja.

Talking about politics with regard to this archipelago […] it may be said it is business as usual. In earlier times we were bitten by the cat, now we are bitten by the dog, both are equally painful. (Liong Hamid Satoko, December 2002, Saibi Samukop.)

Introduction

Even before Law no. 22/1999 on decentralization of the state administration became operative the then-president Habibie granted the Mentawai Archipelago full independent district status at once. As a result of intense lobbying on the part of various local non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Mentawai Archipelago finally detached itself from the mainland district of Padang-Parianman on 9 October 1999 (Mimbar Minang 14-10-1999). The Mentawai case, a pioneer project within the pan-Indonesian process of administrative fragmentation or pemekaran, is foremost the result of activities by local elites entangled in a contest for political positions. The whole process is characterized by intense political turmoil and all kinds of exclusionisms on the basis of various ethnic sentiments.

The detachment of the Mentawai Archipelago from the mainland district Padang-Parianman marked a long awaited shift in political power over the ar-

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1 Most of the data used in this chapter have been gathered during extensive field research in Indonesia in 2002-2003 and late 2004. Earlier versions have been presented during the EUROSEAS Conference 2004 in Paris and the Renegotiating Boundaries workshop 2004 in Jakarta. I would like to thank the Renegotiating Boundaries workgroup and Juniator Tulius for their inspiring comments and valuable additional insights.
Map 3. Mentawai Archipelago and West Sumatra