Campaigning for a new district in West Sumba

Crowd cheerfully welcomes the new district in Sumba

Thousands of people gathered on the plain of Laikaruda in the middle of Sumba on the 31st of January 2003 to celebrate the new district of Central Sumba.1 Trucks and small buses had gone early in the morning to the villages gathering passengers and spreading the word that a delegation from Jakarta was coming to inaugurate the new district. It would be a feast, with gong music and meals with meat. The honoured guests from Jakarta received traditional gifts, such as beautiful hand woven cloth. Traditional dance performances stressed the local population’s commitment and the strong culture and tradition of the area that was to be a district by itself. Banners over the road proclaimed the creation of Central Sumba as an act of pure democracy – *Vox populi, vox dei: Suara rakyat adalah suara Tuhan* (The voice of the people is the voice of God) – and the slogan would locally be interpreted as a sign of (the Christian) God’s blessing over the campaign.

The crowd only learned afterwards that this was just one step in a very long process of creating a new district. They had been mobilized to assure the visiting delegation of the Central Parliament in Jakarta that Central Sumba above all rested on the genuine wishes of the people (*aspirasi masyarakat*).

This chapter is about *pemekaran*, the creation of a new district out of old (sometimes called ‘redistricting’) in West Sumba.2 Current proposals aim to split the present district of West Sumba into three: Central Sumba, West Sumba and Southwest Sumba. Throughout Indonesia, the campaigning rhetoric always mentions three main reasons for creating a new district: it brings the government closer to the people, it will be beneficial to economic prosperity, and it is the wish of the people to have their own district. A new

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2 See the Introduction to this volume.
district will have its own bureaucracy with a budget to spend according its own priorities, which is one good reason for new candidate bureaucrats to create their own district. Setting up a new district bureaucracy promises a large number of jobs for well-educated but presently underemployed locals.

*Pemekaran* is a long process, involving campaigning on Sumba, lobbying to the institutions and people who will take the ultimate decisions in Kupang and Jakarta, and lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Although the efforts for *pemekaran* in West Sumba started in 2000, four years later the campaign has not yet been successful.

The case of Sumba presented here is an example of how new laws and institutions created at the national level are taken as opportunities by members of the local elite, who adjust them to local political culture and use them to strengthen their positions or interests.

In some areas of Indonesia, the struggle for a larger share of the benefits from exploitation of the area’s natural resources is the main driving force behind *pemekaran*; in other areas persisting religious conflicts or ethnic distinctions make *pemekaran* an obvious opportunity to separate ‘us’ from ‘them’. On Sumba, none of these conditions seem to be present. Then what were the social forces behind the campaign? How would the identity justifying the new district be constructed? Why was there so little opposition? How is this case specific for Sumba? Why has the campaign not been successful, or at least, not yet? Does the case of *pemekaran* on Sumba support the thesis that local aristocracies in the Outer Islands of Indonesia survive all changes in national politics and remain in power locally (Magenda 1989:61-2)? How does this case study contribute to understanding the processes that accompany decentralization?3

This chapter describes the campaigns for two of the three new districts proposed in West Sumba, namely Central Sumba and Southwest Sumba.4 Alongside these empirical parts it presents a framework to understand the opportunities that decentralization offers. This starts by stressing that Sumba is a resource poor island and that the state bureaucracy is the most important economic sector, receiving over 90% of its budget from Jakarta. Creating a new district needs actors who engage in political struggle to reach this goal. These people are connected to each other through networks deploying shared histories and cultures. For the purpose of lobbying for their cause – Central Sumba in this case – they create a shared political identity. Two important

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3 Jacqueline Vel’s forthcoming monograph *Uma politics; Democracy and contemporary political culture on Sumba* will include the sequel in the Sumbanese democratization process: the 2005 direct elections for regional head (*pikalda*), in which some of the main actors in this chapter play a prominent role again.

4 The Indonesian names of the proposed districts are: Sumba Tengah, Sumba Barat and Sumba Barat Daya.