

Agrarian Capitalism and the Land Justice Crisis: A Study of the Conflict on Padang Island and PT RAPP

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ABSTRACT

The agrarian conflict in Padang Island, Kepulauan Meranti Regency, Riau, reflects the tension between local communities and large-scale industrial expansion. The government's decision to grant land concessions to PT Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (RAPP) without proper public consultation has triggered resistance from residents who feel their traditional land rights have been ignored. This study uses a qualitative case study approach to explore the roots of the conflict, its social, economic, and ecological impacts, and the role of the state in conflict resolution. The findings reveal significant environmental damage, structural poverty, and the alienation of communities from their ancestral lands. Resolving the conflict requires dialogue, agrarian policy reform, strengthening community-based economies, and protecting the peatland ecosystem. A holistic approach is expected to ensure social justice and environmental sustainability.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The diversity of tribes, customs, cultures and natural resource wealth in a country can trigger conflict if not managed properly (Simarmata et al., 2021). Conflicts often occur between the community and the ruling elite who try to take advantage of the existing natural resources. The roots of agrarian conflicts not only involve the community and government, but also private parties or capital owners who have conflicting interests with the local community inhabiting the area (Ramadhan, 2023). Conflicts that occur in the majority of regions continue to increase (Salim, 2013). The growth of this conflict is not only influenced by one factor but several important factors that involve related parties, namely overlapping land and regulations, unequal control of agrarian resources, unfair utilization, unequal distribution of results, and state policies that do not side with the people. This makes the conflict that occurs considered too acute by many experts, making it difficult to resolve with a partial system, namely by resolving each conflict and per region (Wiradi, 2011 in Salim, 2013). The resolution with this method is considered too energy-consuming and disproportionate between the number of conflict resolutions and the growth of the conflict itself (Salim, 2013).

Agrarian conflict is one of the structural problems that has long overshadowed development in Indonesia, especially in the plantation sector. In 2024, 111 agrarian conflicts were

recorded in the plantation sector with an area of 170,210.90 hectares and affected 27,455 families (KPA, 2025). The granting of land concession permits by the state to corporations is often carried out without considering the rights of local or indigenous communities who have traditionally managed and depended on the land as their main source of livelihood.

Riau became the province with the highest agrarian conflict eruption on Sumatra Island in 2023. The area of land being fought over was 60,955 hectares with 16 cases of conflict. The victims affected were 6,992 heads of families. These conflicts were spread across 20 villages in various districts (KPA, 2024). One of them was the conflict that occurred on Padang Island, Meranti Islands Regency, Riau Province, between the local community and the pulp and paper industry company, PT Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (PT RAPP), which is part of the Asia Pacific Resources International Holdings Limited (APRIL Group) conglomerate. Padang Island is a small island inhabited by around 40,000 people, most of whom live as farmers, fishermen, and traditional forest managers. This area is dominated by deep peat ecosystems that are very vulnerable to environmental damage. In relation to sustainable development, areas like this should receive strict protection because they have important ecological functions, including as carbon storage, hydrological controllers, and providers of local biological resources (Zulbahri & Siregar, 2015). In 2009, the Minister of Forestry issued Decree No. SK.327/Menhut-II/2009 which granted PT RAPP a permit to manage industrial plantation forests (HTI) covering more than 37,000 hectares on Padang Island.

The issuance of the permit drew strong protests from the community because it was carried out without an adequate public consultation process. Residents felt that they were never invited to discuss, and were not even given clear information regarding the management plan. Most of the land included in PT RAPP's concession is a community-managed area, including sago land, rubber plantations, and customary forests that are sources of food and traditional medicines. As a result, the company's presence is seen as a direct threat to the community's living space, both from an economic, social, cultural, and ecological perspective (WALHI Riau, 2012).

PT RAPP's operational activities on Padang Island are considered to have caused quite severe environmental damage. The impact is the drying of peatlands for acacia planting, which then triggers forest and land fires, decreased soil fertility, and a clean water crisis. Not only that, the loss of community access to forests and productive land has led to an increase in poverty rates, disguised unemployment, and horizontal conflicts between residents due to overlapping land claims (Colchester & Chao, 2013). Community resistance to the presence of PT RAPP not only occurs in the form of verbal rejection or local demonstrations, but also takes the form of more extreme and symbolic actions. In late 2011 to early 2012, more than 25 residents of Padang Island who are members of the Padang Island Concerned Community Forum (FMPPP) went on a hunger strike in front of the State Palace in Jakarta. This action became a symbol of the helplessness of rural communities in facing the power of capital and the weak protection of the state for citizens who defend their living space. The action had attracted public attention and encouraged a number of civil society organizations such as WALHI and Forest Peoples Programme to conduct national and international advocacy (Taufik, 2012). Unfortunately, although the action encouraged the government to conduct dialogue and evaluation, until now the conflict has not been completely resolved. PT RAPP continues its operational activities with the claim that all permits held are legally valid, while the community continues to demand recognition of their traditional management rights that have never been legally revoked. In various reports, it is stated that the community who insist on rejecting HTI on Padang Island actually experiences intimidation, criminalization, and negative stigma as an obstacle to development (WALHI Riau, 2012; Zulbahri & Siregar, 2015).

The case in Padang Island clearly illustrates how agrarian conflicts in Indonesia often occur due to overlapping regulations, weak implementation of the principles of social and ecological justice, and the dominance of extractive economic approaches in development. On this side, the emergence of conflict coincides with the emergence of spatial planning failures. How is it possible that an area that has been inhabited by residents for decades or even hundreds of years is simply ignored, as if it has no inhabitants. It is only natural that problems arise that are very expensive (Salim, 2013). The government often only looks at the formal legal aspects without considering the socio-cultural and ecological aspects in granting permits for natural resource management. Based on the principle of Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC), every form of decision-making concerning customary land must involve the affected community actively, voluntarily, and based on complete information (Colchester & Chao, 2013). This is a form of conflict mitigation both before

and after it occurs.

Based on the description above, the researcher feels the need for an in-depth discussion regarding the agrarian conflict in Padang Island, Meranti Islands Regency. The focus of this discussion is on the history of the conflict, the factors behind the conflict, the social, economic, and ecological impacts formed by the dynamics of the conflict and the role of the government and resolution strategies that can be carried out on the conflict. With further discussion on the conflict that occurred, it is hoped that a bright spot can be found from the resolution of the conflict for sustainable development while still paying attention to the living space of the community, both from the economic, social, cultural, and ecological aspects.

2. METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach based on a literature study to analyze agrarian conflicts in Padang Island, Meranti Islands Regency. This approach was chosen because the focus of the research was to understand the conflict dynamics in depth through available secondary data. This literature approach allows researchers to collect data from various written sources, including scientific journals, books, non- governmental organization (NGO) reports, government documents, as well as news from the mass media. This method is considered more effective in gaining a comprehensive picture of complex agrarian conflicts, given the limited access to research sites and potential security risks.

The data sources used in this research include various academic journals that discuss agrarian conflict in general, as well as specific case studies related to Padang Island. The literature reviewed included agrarian conflict theory, the history of land rights formation, forestry policy, and the socio- economic impacts of land conflicts. In addition, the research also utilized statistical data, regional maps and publicly available legal reports to enrich the context of the analysis. This approach aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of conflict patterns, the actors involved, and their impact on local communities.

Data analysis was conducted using the content analysis method, where each document and literature collected was classified based on key themes, such as causes of conflict, patterns of violence, roles of actors, and conflict resolution efforts. This technique allows researchers to identify recurring patterns and relationships between relevant variables in the agrarian conflict on Padang Island. In this process, the researcher also paid attention to source bias and ensured data validity by comparing multiple independent sources. Furthermore, this research also used a historical analysis approach to understand the development of the conflict from a temporal perspective. This approach is important to track changes in government policy, patterns of community resistance, and economic dynamics that influence conflict escalation. By understanding the historical context, this research can provide a clearer picture of the factors that caused the conflict and the opportunities for its resolution. This research is limited to analyzing literature published within the last 20 years to ensure the relevance of the data used. In addition, only peer-reviewed literature published by recognized academic institutions or research organizations will be used, to maintain the quality and credibility of the research results.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

History and Dynamics of Agrarian Conflict in Padang Island

From 2007 to 2009, agrarian conflicts in Sumatra were dominated by issues in the plantation sector. Records show that the massive expansion of oil palm land, with Riau recorded as the province with the largest oil palm land area in Indonesia, was the main trigger for the increase in land struggles between companies and communities. This expansion process does not only invade areas that have long been controlled by residents, but also systematically sought to marginalize their position. From 2010 to 2012, the pattern of conflict shifted significantly. The focus of conflicts began to shift from the plantation sector to production forest areas, especially Industrial Plantation Forests (HTI). This shift was not just a change in location, but also an increase in the number of conflicts in HTI areas that surpassed those that occurred on plantation land. However, this does not mean that conflicts

in the plantation sector have subsided or disappeared. Data collected by the Scale Up organization shows interesting dynamics and indicates the ongoing complexity of conflicts (Salim, 2013).

In the case of Riau, as reported in a 2011 study by Prudensius Maring et al, the roots of the conflict stem from overlapping policies, the expansion of Industrial Plantation Forests (HTI) and Forest Concession Rights (HPH), and the failure of the state to be fair to all citizens. The conflicts are also related to failures in spatial planning, as seen in the case of Pulau Padang, Meranti Islands Regency, which involved communities and the Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (RAPP) company. The state was not careful in establishing the HTI concession area without considering spatial aspects. How can an area that has been inhabited by people for tens or even hundreds of years be ignored as if it were uninhabited. Naturally, conflicts arise that have a large impact and require very high settlement costs.

The main issue in the Pulau Padang case that arises is the concern that communities over the status of their customary lands, especially after the issuance of Minister of Forestry Decree No. 327 of 2009. In addition, the threat to the sustainability of the local ecosystem has also caused unrest, as it is very threatening. Very affecting the community's livelihoods. The peatlands in this area are very sensitive to changes in water levels; during the rainy season, they have the potential to cause flooding, while during the dry season, the area is prone to extreme drought (Salim, 2013).

The conflict originated at from a mismatch between the management of space by local communities and government policies that grant land concessions to Industrial Plantation Forest (HTI) companies. Communities that have long lived in and depended on peat ecosystems utilize land for agriculture, gardening, and other traditional economic activities. The entry of companies with large-scale land management licenses triggered unrest because they were considered to ignore the existence and rights of indigenous peoples to their customary lands (Salim, 2013). RAPP's planned land clearing around the area is seen as a serious threat in the long term, such as the increased risk of seawater intrusion into the land and drought during the dry season. The issue of land tenure and ownership will have a range of social consequences. As the issue continues to develop, divisions have begun to emerge in the community, with some rejecting and others accepting RAPP's presence. This complicates the position of small communities who are trapped in the uncertain and difficult situations, thus weakening their ability to survive (Salim, 2013).

Social, Economic and Ecological Impacts of Conflict

People who once relied on work as loggers (mbalak) or rubber and sago farmers are now facing economic difficulties due to the destruction of ecosystems and narrowing access to productive land. Many young people eventually migrate to Malaysia to become manual laborers, while those who stay can only survive in very limited economic conditions. This inequality shows the failure of the state to provide welfare and social justice, as well as showing the unequal power relations between the community, government and corporations.

Another social impact is the fading of mutual cooperation between residents due to ethnic segregation and economic pressures that force people to become individualistic. The conversion of peatland to HTI also poses ecological risks that extend to social life, such as flooding, forest fires, and increased greenhouse gas emissions. Overall, this journal shows that tenure conflicts not only affect legal and economic aspects, but also undermine social cohesion, widen class inequality, and create alienation of communities from their own homeland. As a result of this influx of large companies, local communities face economic isolation, characterized by a lack of decent work opportunities and the breakdown of local economic systems. People who previously worked independently as loggers began to lose their livelihoods as natural timber ran out and industrial technology entered. Only a few villages still maintained this activity until the early 2010s, such as Tanjung Padang Village. Many people eventually chose to migrate to Malaysia as manual laborers because local jobs were no longer able to make ends meet.

Furthermore, the results of the ethnography show that the price of rubber, which is the main source of income for the community, is very unstable, and has even fallen to Rp3,000/kg. This situation has caused farmers to lose their purchasing power and forced them to change professions or leave the village. In addition, access to new land clearing is also increasingly limited due to conservation policies and the designation of HTI areas, which in turn narrows the community's farming opportunities. This conflict also shows that forestry industry policies that do not take into

account the existence of local economies create structural inequality. The conversion of peatlands for the pulp and paper industry not only damages the environment, but also breaks the chain of local economies based on sustainability. As such, these tenurial conflicts create a form of structural impoverishment, where local communities not only lose their income, but also lose control over their own economic resources. This conflict arose due to the conversion of peatlands into Industrial Plantation Forest (HTI) concessions by large companies such as PT Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (PT RAPP), which had a direct impact on the destruction of the peat ecosystem.

Drainage carried out to clear land for HTI plantations causes land subsidence, increases the risk of flooding, and triggers widespread forest fires every dry season, as noted by the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, which states that if no peat restoration is carried out, the haze tragedy will continue to recur. Peat ecosystems that once stored large amounts of carbon are now turning into sources of greenhouse gas emissions due to drainage and burning. This reduces the environment's capacity to absorb carbon and exacerbates local and global climate change. In addition, this damage also eliminates biodiversity and threatens flora and fauna species that depend on peat ecosystems. Local communities also experience degradation in their quality of life due to the loss of nature's protective functions and the destruction of resources they traditionally used for agriculture and forestry. The conflict between the community and the corporation has led to a narrowing of the community's cultivated land, so that they can no longer farm on fertile land because it has been controlled by the company. As a result, many residents are forced to leave their hometowns to look for work abroad, especially Malaysia. The journal also notes that the effort to convert peatland into HTI is a form of extractive capitalization that does not pay attention to ecological balance, and in fact triggers a wide-scale environmental crisis.

The Role of Government and Policy in Conflict

Forest management in the post- colonial period underwent significant changes in line with the colonial era. With independence Republic of Indonesia. Article 33 paragraph (3) of the 1945 Constitution is the main basis for the state to control forest resources, which followed up through Law No.5/1960 on Basic Agrarian Provisions. Through this provision this provision, government began to establish comprehensive arrangements related to land, which in essence cannot be separated from forest areas. In fact, the existence of Indonesian society consists of various tribes, races and cultures that have lived and developed long before the formation of the state, with a system of customary values and norms that regulate land and forest governance. Existing customary laws reflect local wisdom in the management of natural resources, including forests. Furthermore, Law No. 5 of 1967 on Basic Provisions of Forestry strengthening the state's position in managing forest management through the granting of utilization permits such as Forest Concession Rights (HPH), as well as for other purposes. Purposes plantations and mining. As a result, all forms of activities related to land and forests must obtain approval from the state, while indigenous peoples have almost no access to manage their customary territories without formal legality, because the existence of customary law is considered contrary to positive state law.

The escalating social conflict is accompanied by legality issues involving PT Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (PT RAPP). Several civil society organizations such as Serikat Tani Riau (STR), Jaringan Kerja Penyelamat Hutan Riau (Jikalahari), Lembaga Bantuan Hukum (LBH) Pekanbaru, and the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Walhi) Riau consider that the license granted to PT RAPP by the Minister of Forestry during the term of MS Kaban is contrary to applicable legal provisions. PT RAPP is also accused of environmental destruction, especially in highly sensitive deep peat areas. These activities are considered to have accelerated the decline in the water table, which could lead to the sinking of Padang Island, and damaged the forest ecosystem, which is home to a variety of flora and fauna. This issue relates to a legal conflict over Decree 327/2009.

Conflict Resolution Strategies and the Future of Sustainability

Agrarian conflict is a complex issue rooted in a variety of factors, including unequal land ownership, exploitation of natural resources, and policies that often favor corporations over local communities. In Pulau Padang, the conflict between the community and PT RAPP is a clear example of the intersection of economic interests and indigenous rights. Without an effective resolution, this conflict not only impacts social welfare but also risks damaging the ecosystems that have been part of the community's lives for years. Achieving a sustainable settlement requires a multifaceted

strategy, ranging from dialogue and mediation approaches to agrarian policy reform. It is not enough to end disputes in the short term- settlements must ensure that people get their rights fairly, that ecosystems are maintained, and that local economic systems can thrive without dependence on large industrial exploitation. In this context, it is important to understand how resolution strategies can be implemented by considering social, legal, economic and environmental aspects.

Dialogue and Mediation Approach

The dialog and mediation approach is the main strategy in resolving agrarian conflicts, as it allows for more open communication between the parties involved. According to Achmad (2023), Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) such as mediation and negotiation have proven effective in resolving land disputes in Indonesia. Mediation offers a space for communities to express their aspirations directly to companies and the government, resulting in more inclusive and fair agreements. In some cases, mediation has successfully de-escalated conflicts that could have led to physical clashes. However, the effectiveness of mediation depends on the active involvement of all parties, including the government acting as a facilitator. The government has an important role in ensuring that the mediation process is transparent and does not favor the interests of the company alone. In a study by Nulhaqim et al. (2022), it was found that mediations led by independent institutions tend to produce fairer agreements than mediations controlled by the government or corporations. Therefore, there is a need for regulations that ensure that mediation is carried out based on the principles of fairness and openness. In addition, the success of the dialogue depends on the existence of a monitoring mechanism that ensures that any agreements reached are actually implemented on the ground. Often, the results of negotiations only remain in documents without concrete implementation, causing conflicts to re-emerge at a later date. Monitoring can be carried out by civil society organizations, academics, and independent institutions tasked with overseeing policy implementation on the ground. Despite the challenges, the mediation approach remains the most viable strategy for resolving agrarian conflicts in Pulau Padang. By creating a safe and inclusive space for dialog, all parties have the opportunity to find a common solution that accommodates the interests of the community, environmental sustainability, as well as the company's interest in developing the local economic sector.

Policy and Regulatory Reform

One of the main causes of agrarian conflicts is policies that lack transparency and favor the interests of corporations over communities. Studies conducted by Alan (2024) show that agrarian regulations in Indonesia are still very much in favor of large investors, often ignoring the rights of indigenous peoples and small farmers. In the context of Pulau Padang, the granting of concession licenses through Minister of Forestry Decree No. 327/Menhut- II/2009 has been the main trigger of tension between the community and PT RAPP.

Policy reforms are needed to make regulations governing land ownership and management more inclusive of local communities. One important step is land redistribution for smallholders and indigenous communities who have long managed peatlands as a source of livelihood. The legality of land ownership must be clarified so that community rights are protected from company expansion that could potentially harm them. In addition, policies should provide space for co-management, which is a land management system that involves communities and companies together. This model has been implemented in several regions with good success, as it provides fairer access to natural resources. The government must create regulations that encourage companies to collaborate with local communities in managing resources by considering social and environmental aspects. Without fundamental policy reforms, agrarian conflict in Pulau Padang potentially to be prolonged. More transparent regulations, as well as strict monitoring mechanisms for policy implementation, are crucial steps in ensuring justice for conflict- affected communities.

Community-based Economic Strengthening

In addition to conflict resolution through dialog and policy, economic strategies also play an important role in creating long-term solutions for affected communities. According to Alan (2024), strengthening community-based economies is one of the most effective ways to reduce people's dependence on large industries and create more sustainable livelihood alternatives. On Padang Island, the community has great potential to develop the agricultural and plantation sectors based on local commodities such as sago and rubber. However, without the support of good infrastructure and market access, this potential is difficult to develop. The government needs to provide assistance in the form of funding, training and technology so that the community can optimize this

sector to the fullest. With cooperatives and community-based economic systems, communities can have stronger bargaining power in the market. In addition to the economic aspect, cooperatives also have a role in improving social welfare. A case study conducted by Nulhaqim et al. (2022) showed that cooperatives can help increase farmers' income by up to 30% compared to individual systems. Cooperatives allow farmers to access business credit, production tools, as well as a wider distribution network, so that they are not dependent on large corporations. With a community-based economic system in place, the people of Pulau Padang can build economic independence without having to rely on resource exploitation by large industries. This not only reduces conflicts with the company, but also improves long-term welfare for the local community.

Ecosystem Conservation and Protection

The agrarian conflict in Pulau Padang not only affects the community but also puts serious pressure on the peat ecosystem. Peat forests are among the ecosystems most vulnerable to degradation due to industrial exploitation, so environmental protection must be part of the conflict resolution strategy. According to Achmad (2023), exploitation of peatlands without proper control can lead to the risk of flooding and forest fires, which have already occurred in some areas of Riau due to aggressive land clearing. Therefore, the government and communities must work together to develop ecosystem restoration programs, including the rehabilitation of degraded land and the protection of sustainable areas. One of the measures that can be applied is social forestry, a community-based forest management program that allows local residents to manage and preserve the environment. This approach has been implemented in several regions with positive results in reducing deforestation rates while improving the welfare of communities that depend on forest resources. In addition, stricter policies on industrial expansion in peat areas are needed. The government must ensure that companies operating in Pulau Padang apply high environmental standards and contribute to forest rehabilitation programs. Without clear conservation measures, Pulau Padang's ecosystem risks further degradation, impacting not only the environment but also the welfare of the communities that rely on this natural resource.

4. CONCLUSION

The agrarian conflict that occurred in Padang Island, Meranti Islands Regency, Riau, is a clear form of structural problems in natural resource governance in Indonesia. The root of the conflict stems from the government's granting of a land concession license to PT Riau Andalan Pulp and Paper (RAPP) without a transparent and participatory consultation process with local communities. Communities that have long depended on peatlands and customary forests felt their management rights were ignored, leading to tensions between residents and the company. This conflict not only disrupts the social life of the community, but also causes ecological damage such as peatland fires, decreased water quality, and loss of biodiversity. In addition, the economic impact is very significant, as seen from the increase in unemployment, poverty, and forced migration out of the region due to limited access to productive land. The government, in this case, is considered not to have carried out its functions fairly because it favors corporate interests rather than protecting the rights of indigenous peoples. To resolve conflicts sustainably, a multi-stakeholder approach through open dialogue, agrarian policy reform, community-based economic empowerment, and protection of vulnerable peat ecosystems is needed. Without policy changes that favor social and ecological justice, similar conflicts will continue to repeated and inhibit sustainable development in Indonesia's coastal areas and small islands.

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