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Southeast Asia Centre

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Southeast Asia Working Paper Series

Paper no.5

May 2023



SOUTHEAST ASIA
Research at LSE ■

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Published by

Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre
London School of Economics and Political Science
Houghton Street
London
WC2A 2AE
seac.admin@lse.ac.uk
www.lse.ac.uk/seac

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Scrutinising Nusantara: The Making of an Authoritarian City

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Abstract

In August 2019, Indonesian President Joko Widodo unexpectedly announced the plan to build a new capital called Nusantara. It will relocate the capital from Jakarta to East Kalimantan by 2024. This paper critically examines Indonesia's ambition to build Nusantara within a short time. In this paper, a narrative policy framework is applied to unpack the core reasons and assumptions that underpin Widodo's adamant decision to carry out a large-scale urban project of the new capital despite social and financial constraints. By interrogating two fundamental fallacies underlying the Nusantara project, in the rationales and the construction process, I show how the new capital project is deeply problematic. The notion of techno-nationalist urbanism is proposed to underline the contradiction in the logic and rationality of Nusantara's urban system as a result of authoritarian symptoms. Further, the paper links Nusantara to the nature of power embodied in Widodo's strong desire for a legacy and its impact on Indonesian democracy in the future.

Keywords

capital relocation; Nusantara; techno-nationalist urbanism; authoritarianism; Indonesia.

Acknowledgements

This paper stems from a research project funded by Singapore's Ministry of Education Tier 1 grant [Award number: RG123/20 (NS)]. An early version was presented at the LSE Southeast Asia Centre's Seminar Series during my time as a Visiting Senior Fellow at the Centre. I am sincerely thankful to Professor Hyun Bang Shin for his helpful comments and suggestions on this working paper. Also, I thank Ms Katie Boulton for her kind assistance in facilitating my visit to LSE.

Introduction

A historic moment was marked on 16 August 2019 when President Joko Widodo of Indonesia was sworn in for a second term. In his presidential address, Widodo announced a decision to relocate the nation's capital from Jakarta to East Kalimantan. The plan came as a surprise to many. Widodo never mentioned building a new capital during his presidential campaign. Nevertheless, the construction of a new capital instantly became one of the national strategic projects his administration aimed to accomplish. The intention to move Indonesia's capital from Jakarta to another place has been shown by previous presidents of Indonesia. It is Widodo who seems implacable and very committed to realising this vision, which becomes a goal he wants to achieve by the time he steps down in 2024. When the Covid-19 pandemic severely struck Indonesia in early 2020, the project was put on hold for a moment. In early 2021, the Widodo government decided to resume the new capital project. The planning process went unprecedentedly fast. The political process moved even faster. The parliament passed a new law on the national capital within 43 days despite public outcry over the low quality of the academic study report upon which the law was conceived (Prabowo, 2022). Shortly after, Widodo decided to name the new capital after "Nusantara", a pre-colonial term commonly used to refer to the archipelago of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. A new special authority called Otorita IKN was quickly formed to supervise the entire construction and run the city once completed. Everything happened hastily in order to meet Widodo's timeline, which is to commemorate the independence day in August 2024 at the new presidential palace in Nusantara.

Why does Indonesia insist on building a new capital when the world is facing a possible post-pandemic global recession? What are the factors that become the underlying reasons for Widodo and his administration to move the capital from Jakarta to East Kalimantan? More

importantly, what are the political implications of relocating Indonesia's capital? These are the questions this paper aims to answer and discuss to unpack a set of rationales behind the construction of the Nusantara City. The main objective of this paper is two-fold. First, it is set to expose the logics the Widodo government relies on in crafting the justification for relocating the national capital. Further, I intend to interrogate the core reasons and assumptions that vindicate Widodo's extremely expensive project. Inevitably, it unpacks the contradiction and inconsistency that render Nusantara a high-risk urban project. Second, by exposing the logics, rationales, and contradictions of the Nusantara project, I wish to achieve another objective, which is to provide a lens into the politics of infrastructure in Indonesia during the Widodo leadership. Widodo's government has been tightly associated with the initiation of infrastructure projects that were part of his 2014 presidential campaign. Various projects of infrastructural development across the countries have been carried out massively since Widodo came to office. The Nusantara capital project is supposed to mark the culmination of Widodo's developmental ambition. In this paper, I aim to show how Widodo's bewildering ambition to build a new capital within such a short time is linked to the nature of Widodo's political power.

There are two arguments I wish to advance in this paper. One deals with politics and power in the construction of Nusantara as a massive infrastructural undertaking. As mentioned earlier, relocating the capital from Jakarta to another place is not new, and Widodo's adamant decision to pursue Nusantara at this moment may seem proper. Here I argue that the idiosyncratic motivation is stronger than the real cost-benefit analysis in pushing for the Nusantara project, which causes worrying impacts on Indonesian democracy. Another argument pertains to the construction of Nusantara as the future capital of Indonesia. While the environmental conditions of Jakarta as the current capital warrant urgent fixes, the decision to

relocate the capital to East Kalimantan is by no means unproblematic. It is argued that the use of technocratic calculations in pushing for the relocation is not well-founded. The two arguments are grounded on the conceptual framework I shall provide in the following section.

This study largely relies on a qualitative method, relying on the existing literature on Indonesia studies, government documents and archives related to the planning and construction of Nusantara. Specifically for the latter, three documents are the basis of my analysis: 1) *Naskah Akademik Rancangan Undang Undang Tentang Ibu Kota Negara* (the Academic Paper for a State Capital Bill); 2) *Buku Saku Pemindahan Ibu Kota Negara* (The Pocket Book of the Relocation of State Capital); and 3) *Lampiran UU No 3 Tahun 2022 Tentang Ibu Kota Negara* (Appendix of State Capital Bill). All documents are openly accessible online. In analysing these materials, I applied a narrative policy approach (Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2018), which allows us to unpack how the policy of the new capital project was conceived in a narrative with a plot consisting of the past, present, and future. I then identify the underlying assumption in the narrative justifying Indonesia's new capital project. These critical points are elaborated on throughout this paper.

The Political Logic of New Capital

The construction of new capitals is commonly assessed from the vantage point of urban design and planning. There are always technocratic elements that go into the process of planning and designing a new capital. This practice situates a new capital city as a project that reflects the capacity and vision of the government. When a new capital project is announced, it embarks on the goal of achieving two sets of goals; one is the technological and material, and the other is the symbolic. While this essay embraces these two aspects in the construction of the Nusantara

project, it adopts the analytical framework from Vadim Rossman (2017), who emphasizes “the interplay between political regimes and capital city relocation.” Two implications result from this framework. First, this essay will address the logics behind Indonesia’s capital relocation, which relates very much to the ways in which the current political regime problematises the political economic circumstances. Second, it critically examines the impact of the politics of capital relocation on the planning and design processes, which affect the prospect of Nusantara as a large-scale undertaking. For the latter, the notion of spatialising authoritarianism offers a suitable lens to unpack the political consequences of the Indonesian leader’s desire to build a new capital.

The interplay between urban space and authoritarian politics is ubiquitous. As Koch (2022) elaborates, we need to acknowledge the territorial trap imbricated in taking the state as the central unit of analysis at the expense of the heterogeneities of experiences felt by the people living in the city. In fact, there are myriad ways in which power is exercised across space and time, none of which are uniform in the production of urban environment. Thus, it is critical to analyse how undemocratic desire and intention create an authoritarian urban space in a manner that exemplifies the state’s power and diminishes the role of citizens in city planning and governance (Hagen, 2022). Authoritarianism, then, is as much a lack of negotiation between the citizenry and the government, as it is an imposition upon the citizenry by the technocratic operation.

At this juncture, it is plausible to connect the undemocratic impulse in the creation of new capital urban space with what I shall call “techno-nationalist urbanism.” Throughout history, we always see the imprint of nationalist ideology in the city (Stephens, 2013). It is embedded in the visual, ambience, and structure of the capital city, which is meant to project the power and

dominance of the idea that underlies the state's institutional logic, action, and apparatuses. In a similar vein, technology and nationalism are not exclusive to one another. Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars have provided ample evidence demonstrating the amalgamation of technology and nationalist rhetoric in the construction of technical artifacts (Chopra, 2008; Adria, 2010; Matala and Sahari, 2017). When technological construction is dictated by nationalist ideas, the outcomes are not always positive. The reason is that nationalism contains ideological beliefs that may eschew rational actions, as it gives priority to symbolizing the grand vision of the elites over solving the real-world problems faced by the people (Amir, 2007).

The nexus of authoritarianism, technological nationalism, and urban system constitutes the core of techno-nationalist urbanism that I shall use as a critical concept to guide my interrogation of the logic, political rationality, and spatial materiality in the Nusantara project. It embodies two fundamental premises. First, Nusantara presents a case of techno-nationalist urbanism where the urban system and landscape are designed to engender a nationalist vision yet founded on authoritarian practices in city governance. It may depart from the real problems plaguing Indonesian socioeconomic development, but the logical foundation is weak and questionable. Nevertheless, the project continues to be executed driven by undemocratic actions, which the Indonesian leader has pushed for. Second, the assemblage of technological fantasy and nationalist aesthetics only produces bizarre contradictions in the spatial configuration of Nusantara. While environmental sustainability was promised to be at the centre of Nusantara's urban system operation, it was tainted by the nationalist imaginaries shaping the design of Nusantara edifices. As a result, Nusantara suffers from disoriented design. These two premises are further elaborated subsequently in the following sections.

Two Logical Fallacies

Indonesia is one of the largest archipelagic countries in the world, with approximately 17,000 islands stretched from Sumatra all the way to West Papua. It is an upper-middle-income country with a steadily growing economy. Yet, its economic development has long been marked by the regional disparity between Java Island and other islands. Hall Hill (2000) has exposed how deeply striking the gap between these two regions is. A map of night times light can easily show how much Java is more lit compared to the rest of the country, indicating inequality in infrastructures, electricity, and urban centres. More accurately reflecting this perennial inequality are the contributions these two regions make to the national gross domestic product (GDP). According to Indonesia's National Bureau of Statistics (BPS), in 2021, Java made 57.89% of the national GDP, while the rest is shared by five other regions, including Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, Bali and Nusa Tenggara, and Maluku and West Papua (BPS, 2021). Disproportionate economic development dates back to the colonial era when Java was already the centre of the Dutch East Indies government. Today, 56% of Indonesian people live in Java. For years, higher prosperity and economic well-being in Java have become a source of envy for other provinces outside Java. As a postcolonial nation, disparity of this sort can grow seeds of separatism, as has been seen emerging in several parts of Indonesia in the recent past.

The central government in Jakarta had attempted to bring equality outside Java. One example is the transmigration programmes carried out during Suharto's regime, which ceased to continue in the late 1990s (Fearnside, 1997). Another is General Allocation Fund (DAU) meant to increase provincial budgets (Swastyardi, 2008). These initiatives made only a sporadic impact on levelling the playing field. This core narrative laid the argument for the relocation of the

national capital. In this narrative, the new capital city in East Kalimantan was proposed as the ultimate equaliser of development. As explicitly stated in the academic report published by the Agency for National Development Planning (BAPPENAS), the construction of Nusantara in East Kalimantan is “meant to boost the economy in the eastern part of Indonesia, thus making development no longer Java-centered.” It is believed that “with the new capital located no longer in Java, it will lessen inter-regional disparity” (BAPPENAS, 2021; p.172).

While the new capital may trigger a hike in economic growth in East Kalimantan, the problem of regional inequality and uneven distribution of prosperity in Indonesia is larger than just a matter of where the capital is located. An in-depth study by Takahiro and Mitsuhiro (2022) reveals the complex reality of regional disparity in Indonesia. It combines spatial structure, ethnic politics, and financial allocation. As the island with the most population, Java is better developed with the longest highway roads, railways, power grid, and better universities that provide the most skilled manpower. As a result, large business groups, both domestic and foreign investors, tend to remain in Java (Brodjonegoro, 2004; Amir, 2012). From this viewpoint, what Indonesia truly needs are multiple centres of growth located throughout the archipelago. Thus, rather than building an expensive new capital, it is far more clever and wiser for the Indonesian government to concentrate on further improving regional autonomy (Holtzappel & Ramstedt, 2009), fiscal decentralisation (Smoke & Lewis, 1996), and nationwide infrastructure projects (Kuncoro, 2013; Salim & Negara, 2018), which have a greater long-term impact on equalising growth and prosperity. Relocating the capital only moves the centre of growth and risks failing to trigger an effect of equal distribution of development across the country far from the capital.

Another rationale for the relocation of capital outside Java is a long list of urban problems plaguing Jakarta as the old capital. Situated on the northwest coast of Java, Jakarta

originates from a small town Sunda Kelapa, before it turned into an important trading port of the Dutch East Indies called Batavia in the seventeenth century. After independence, Jakarta was designated as the national capital. Today, Jakarta is the largest city in Indonesia, bearing a provincial-level status with a population of 10.56 million. Providing better access to education and employment reasonably renders the capital an attractive place for many Indonesians to live in. Since the 1990s, Jakarta has undergone massive urbanisation, which entailed plenty of socio-economic and environmental problems as the city continues to expand and develop. A neoliberal logic had long governed spatial and urban policy in Jakarta (Kusno 2000) that promoted the use of private vehicles instead of providing decent public transportation (Irawan et al., 2019). Consequently, most Jakarta citizens are stuck in traffic for hours daily. The increasing load of human activities and unregulated use of groundwater exacerbates Jakarta's vulnerability to flooding (Padawangi and Douglass, 2015; Dwirahmadi et al., 2019). With the rise of sea levels caused by climate change, Jakarta is literally sinking a few centimetres every year (Bakr, 2015).

The bottom line is that the old capital of Indonesia is facing growing amounts of urban risk. This prompts another narrative for the central government to deem Jakarta no longer feasible to serve as the capital. As noted in BAPPENAS's report, "all the problems in Jakarta exist because the city is not only the centre of the national government, but also the centre of all activities, including trade, finance, services, education, and to some extent processing industry." (Ibid., p. 32) Thus, it is assumed that "Jakarta is not efficient and effective to compete with the capital of other countries at present and in the future. Therefore, a relocation of the capital is inevitable." (Ibid.,p. 42)

Considering the environmental deterioration in Jakarta, Widodo's decision to relocate the capital may sound logical. However, this policy is based on a problematic assumption. It

assumes that Jakarta's problems are primarily caused by its function as capital. The fact is that all activities of the central government in Jakarta contribute only minutiae to the urban predicaments in Jakarta.¹ The total number of central government employees is only a small fraction of the population living in and around Jakarta. This means moving the capital is unlikely to remedy Jakarta's environmental crisis. More importantly, Hall Hill (1997) showed how industrialisation in Indonesia followed a centralised pattern. It had formed a concentration of growth around the capital (Rothenberg et al., 2017). The result was unfettered urbanisation with poor planning and infrastructures, which is the root cause of urban ills exploding in metropolitan Jakarta (Hudalah & Firman, 2012). This means Jakarta's environmental conditions are caused less by the status of capital than concentrated industrial growth. From this vantage point of view, fixing Jakarta and changing the development model are more favourable and less costly than building a new capital in East Kalimantan, which may repeat the same mistake in Jakarta.

Undemocratic Desire for Legacy

The imagination of having a capital city that is authentic to Indonesian culture dates back to the Sukarno era. In July 1957, President Sukarno proposed to create a new capital that did not inherit the colonial past. A city in Central Kalimantan called Palangkaraya was considered by Sukarno as perfect for serving the capital city of post-independent Indonesia. The planning was conducted shortly before it was permanently terminated due to a political crisis in the 1960s (Wijanarka, 2006). Another endeavour to move the capital was sought in 1997 when President Suharto issued a presidential decree on the development of a city in Jonggol, West Java. The plan is less

¹ According to Governor of Jakarta, the presence of the central government contributes only 7% to traffic congestion in Jakarta. This may be extended to other urban problems. See: <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20220127204733-20-752216/anies-pindah-ibu-kota-tak-ada-efeknya-pada-kemacetan-jakarta>

ambitious, as Suharto intended only to build a new administrative city about fifty kilometres from Jakarta. Again, this never came into realisation due to the Asian financial crisis leading to the fall of Suharto. During the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014), Indonesia mulled over the idea of relocating the capital, but it never got into Yudhoyono's priority. It was not until Joko Widodo's second term that the construction of the new capital became a real project to be accomplished by the Indonesian government. A budget of US\$35 billion was projected by Widodo's administration to finance the construction of Nusantara. Twenty per cent of the budget was to come from the government pocket while the rest was expectedly covered by private and foreign investments.

With three failed previous attempts and now pushing for a new capital project with a high price tag, one wonders why Joko Widodo shows unwavering passion to realise Nusantara by the end of his term. This becomes even more bewildering when we look at the preparation and planning processes that were carried out in such a hurried manner and on the weak basis of technocratic rationalisation. A reasonable answer needs a look into the trajectory of Widodo as a politician. Coming from a business background, he started a political career when winning the mayoral election of Surakarta in 2005. After securing a second term effortlessly five years later, in 2012, he ran for the Jakarta governor. His victory in Jakarta catapulted Widodo to triumph in the 2014 presidential election and a second term in 2019. There is no doubt that Widodo is one of the most successful politicians in Indonesia who is able to reach the highest political power within less than ten years in politics. Widodo's power and leadership have very much revolved around his conviction that the development and prosperity of Indonesian people can be achieved primarily by physical infrastructures. As a result, his first term was marked by an array of infrastructural programs, ranging from power plants, toll highways, and dams to airports and

seaports. For Widodo, infrastructures are fundamental to his success as a political leader. In Widodo's vision, all achievements have to be translated into the physical, and progress is measured by how many physical infrastructures are built. Widodo imagines all this process of development to culminate in the creation of an urban city that reflects his idealistic concept of a capital representing a new future of Indonesia. Widodo seeks to finish his political career by delivering a new city because it is where he started his political journey. Such an obsession with a futuristic city is inherently embedded in the way Widodo plays his politics, especially at the end of his presidency, in which he wishes to leave a political legacy manifested in an enduring physical form.

This is a conjunction where it is crucial to critically examine Nusantara as a political project rather than merely an urban project. Following Shin and Zhao (2018), we can consider the Nusantara project to embody Widodo's political desire for a long-term legacy, but also it reflects the nature of power characterising the Widodo leadership. The consequences of this politics are significant in the way public voices are often eluded on the Nusantara project. The fact that the Nusantara project was conceived behind a closed door without transparent public discussion (Erwanti and Waluyo, 2022) indicates the impact of Widodo's political desire on the democratic discourse of capital relocation. For such an extremely important decision that has to be discussed openly, such secrecy engenders a worrying sign of democratic decline. The expedited process of the new capital law in the parliament in the absence of meaningful participation clearly demonstrates an attempt to eliminate dissenting voices in political decision-making (Farisa, 2022). More troublesome was a series of failed efforts to extend Widodo's presidency, either by postponing the 2024 elections or by amending the constitution that would allow Widodo to run for a third term. The reason behind this is the fact that the Nusantara project

fell behind schedule after it was announced in 2019. The pandemic situation has halted the project's commencement for two years. Previously Widodo despised a third-term agenda, but in early 2022, he seemed to realize that his pet project was unlikely to reach the target by the time he left office in 2024. An extension of two or three years was considered crucial for Widodo to ensure the continuation of Nusantara's construction (Firmansyah, 2022).

The concerted efforts to mobilise public support for Widodo's extended presidency were started by Muhaimin Iskandar and Zulkifli Hasan; each led a political party that joined the government coalition. In February 2022, Iskandar and Hasan openly suggested pushing back the presidential election for two or three years due to the potential economic crisis after the global pandemic. Another similar demand came from Minister of Investment Bahlil Lahadalia, who voiced the interest of the business community in asking for another term for Widodo to stay in office. The most controversial affair blew up when Coordinating Minister of Investment and Maritime Luhut Panjaitan unabashedly claimed to have Big Data of 110 million Indonesian people from the Internet. The data was presented as proof that millions of Indonesians agreed to let Widodo grab another term, which drew ridicules from Big Data experts in the country. Widodo never explicitly said "yes" to the extension demand from his ministers and supporters, but he refused denouncing either. Fortunately, the third-term agenda flopped because of massive protests from critical intellectuals and civil society groups, but more important is the rejection from Widodo's own political party, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), to back the constitutional amendment for a third term. It was impossible for Widodo to pursue his unacknowledged agenda of presidential extension without the approval of his own party.

Nevertheless, the undemocratic desire finds its way in the formation of a special government agency called the National Capital Authority or Otorita IKN for short. The agency is

assigned to oversee the construction of Nusantara and to govern the city afterwards. This model is unprecedented in the history of city governments in Indonesia. The “otorita” model is commonly used specifically for a government organisation that runs an infrastructure complex such as dams, industrial estates, and the like. The Otorita IKN is the first of its kind to operate a city. Why did Widodo decide to go with the otorita model? Unlike other cities and districts in Indonesia, where the head is elected by the citizens, the head of the Otorita IKN is appointed by the president (Arrijal, 2022). This clearly confirms Widodo’s intention to shy Nusantara away from the direct election procedure and to some extent dodging the democratic norms. The loss of his close ally, Basuki T. Purnama, in the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election² is likely to prompt him to believe that having a direct mayoral election of Nusantara may hinder the project from achieving its goals in the long run. This is a very pragmatic reason, yet the consequences are profound on the public life of Nusantara as an urban culture. The appointed leadership can plausibly be extended to view the Otorita IKN as the embodiment of Widodo’s authoritarian vision of urban governance. Because the Otorita manager is appointed by the president, the agency head is accountable not to the public but to the president’s office. This entails an absence of direct connection between the city government and the people who live in the capital. There is even no city parliament, council, or the like that serves to mediate the engagement of the executive officers with the people. Such a weird arrangement of the national capital erases the notion of citizens in the city. With no democratic channel, Nusantara is going in a direction where it will become a city without citizens in a sociological sense.

² When Joko Widodo became president in 2014, his deputy, Basuki T. Purnama stepped in as Jakarta governor. Purnama assumed his term until 2017. In the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, he lost to Anies Baswedan, who is a former education minister in Widodo’s cabinet before he was reshuffled in 2016. Baswedan then brought in a different governing style in the Jakarta administration and development, which seem to displease Widodo. Since then, Widodo and Baswedan became embroiled in a political rivalry.

Furthermore, the multi-layered structure of anti-democratic actions in the making of Nusantara is likely to turn the new capital into a form of spatialising authoritarianism, as discussed above. It is an authoritarian city built on the assumption that city life is all about technocratic operation whereby public voices and imaginations do not matter. It is a city with urban spaces that function as a sarcophagus of democracy in which the role of citizens is severely reduced to mere users at best. All in all, the ambitious Nusantara city constitutes Widodo's politics of infrastructure that becomes an end rather than a means by which democratic values are potentially annihilated.

Techno-Nationalist Urbanism

Every postcolonial nation bears a penchant for having an imagination of the future (Shin et al., 2020), where colonial history is removed and replaced by the grandeur of the past (Malik, 2003). This drives many countries with colonial experiences to construct a capital city that reflects their pure culture and national ideology (Vale, 2006). In this vision, the ideological foundation of the nation is embodied in the material construction of the streets, the boulevards, the government buildings, the national museum, and the presidential palace, all of which make up the urban identity of the capital. Two elements are always present in the construction of new capital. One is technology; the other is nationalism. In technological development, the amalgamation of these elements results in technological nationalism (Amir, 2007), a phenomenon commonly found in many nations but particularly postcolonial societies. In technological nationalism, national identity constitutes the symbolic structure shaping the technological configuration, which the postcolonial state seeks to achieve to project its sublime image.

Extending the notion of technological nationalism, it is possible to find a similar pattern of fusion between technology and nationalism in the construction of Nusantara, an imaginative product, which I shall call “techno-nationalist urbanism.” The concept of techno-nationalist urbanism draws on the idea that urban spaces are always political and material structures of the city imprinted by power relations. Both technological and nationalist components are already laden by political forces, thus making techno-nationalist urbanism an even more salient form of a political project. The way Nusantara is imagined and designed follows this tendency in which the presence of technology and nationalism appears in the discursive and technical forms of the city’s systems and landscape. Yet, the fusion of technology and nationalism in Nusantara cannot be more problematic because of the contradictions between the two. To understand this, it is necessary to dissect technological and nationalist elements separately.

As described in the Bappenas document, Nusantara is to be built as a smart city. It is an urban concept increasingly adopted by many cities around the globe (Marvin et al., 2015). As Haleboua (2020) notes, smart cities “prioritise maintaining order and efficiency and fostering economic growth and competitiveness...through technological and scientific developments” (p.11). The concept of smart city lies in the utilisation of digital and information technology as the backbone of urban infrastructures. It aims to increase efficiency in resource use, allowing the city to be more sustainable and liveable. Thus, digital and information technology constitutes the core structure of public services in Nusantara, most importantly, transportation and telecommunication. Autonomous vehicles, the blockchain, Artificial Intelligence, and Metaverse are among the technical jargons ubiquitously mentioned in Nusantara's planning and design documents (Saputra, 2022). The designers, architects, and planners of Nusantara envision the city to function and operate as a smart city where problems such as traffic jams, floods,

pollution, and inefficient government bureaucracy plaguing Jakarta will not exist in the new capital. They believe that digital and information technology is the panacea for all urban ills paralysing the old capital.

While the technological element of Nusantara is organised around the sustainability goal, the element of nationalism appears contradictory to what the Nusantara planners have intended to achieve. A case in point is the design of the presidential palace, which lies at the centre of the urban landscape of Nusantara. The presidential palace is designed by a famous Indonesian sculptor, Nyoman Nuarta. He created a design for the palace to resemble a large, gigantic Garuda, a mythical bird used as Indonesia's national emblem³. The architectural concept was actually recycled from Nuarta's cancelled project in Batam of the Riau Islands. Rather than being selected from a design competition, the design project was allegedly commissioned directly by President Widodo, whom Nuarta happens to know personally.

While the original urban design of Nusantara aimed to suit the Kalimantan forest's environmental condition, Nuarta's presidential palace design strikingly defies the logic of sustainability. For instance, the bird structure of the palace is made of metal material, structured in such a way that does not pay attention to environmental concerns. A more noticeable issue is the landscape of the palace. It is encircled by big roads built for cars that clearly hinder pedestrians from accessing the area rather than providing open public spaces for citizens to walk around. The landscape design contradicts the promise of making Nusantara a walkable city. Adding to this ironic design is the architectural style of the palace, which gives a strongly arrogant gesture of colonial buildings. The entire visual casts more of an authoritarian image rather than a space to celebrate democratic freedom. The bottom line is that Nusantara sends a

³ See the figure on the government web site, which can be found at: <https://ikn.go.id/penampakan-desain-final-istana-kepresidenan-di-ibu-kota-baru-keren> (accessed 15 May 2023).

sign of contradiction between technological sustainability and nationalist aesthetics in which the latter seems to violate the former.

Conclusion

What lessons can we learn from the case study of Indonesia in building a new capital city? My analysis using the narrative policy framework yields two points that are relevant to scrutinise large-scale capital city projects in similar contexts.

First and foremost, it is obvious that Nusantara is a crash project. The conception and inception of the city as Indonesia's ideal capital for the future are marked by hasty attitudes from the announcement to legislation and to design and construction. Everything occurred at a high pace that consequently affected the quality it resulted. Two underlying reasons for the development of Nusantara can easily be debunked. As elaborated above, the argument for equal growth distribution is very weak and empirically ungrounded, while the call for moving from Jakarta is not well justified. This renders the rationality for Widodo's ambitious vision to build Nusantara as a means to take a developmental leapfrog highly questionable due to the lack of strong technocratic justification. The consequence is profound because it may affect the prospect of Nusantara to be financially viable and ecologically sustainable. For any large-scale urban project such as Nusantara, weak rationalisation and miscalculation are likely to cause the project to never fully complete. Strong criticism from many experts has not changed Widodo's adamant gesture to accomplish the US\$ 35 billion new capital that has by far become the biggest megaproject in the modern history of Indonesia. At this point, Nusantara is, without a doubt, a legacy-building project Widodo aims to achieve. Such a strong political motive that tends to have carried more weight than the technocratic calculations and operational feasibility could

potentially exacerbate the risk embedded in the megaproject. This is consequential of the politics of infrastructure, which nevertheless reveals the weakening effect of Widodo's power and leadership on Indonesian democracy.

The second issue appears even more troubling. The process continually defines the product. And this is what we see unfolding in the construction of Nusantara. The new capital is supposed to reflect the emerging democratic culture of Indonesian society. It is expected to celebrate Indonesian pluralism as a nation of multi ethnicities and multi religions. Also, Indonesian people have longed for a capital city that is advanced in terms of urban systems and infrastructures. While Widodo intends to meet some of these expectations, he has made a series of decisions that have dwarfed the potential of democracy as the basis for Nusantara to become advanced and egalitarian. A critical note on this issue is fundamentally important to emphasise because this is where the irony lies. Ever since Indonesia embarked on democratisation after the fall of the New Order authoritarianism in 1998, local politics arose prominently in shaping national politics. Democratisation came with decentralisation and local elections, giving rise to local leaders directly elected to govern their cities and districts. The wave of democratisation around the country renders cities to become a new centre of political power that facilitates mayors and district heads across Indonesia to demonstrate their governing capacity for the betterment of their constituents. Thanks to the deepening democracy in Indonesia, Joko Widodo came to power out of this new urban politics, which allowed him to rapidly ascend to the top power structure in such a short time. It is deeply ironic that now Widodo has pushed an urban project that potentially undermines democracy in the pursuit of a political legacy.

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