

## Book Review

# Territorial Conflicts Minus the Fear of Secession

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## Introduction

Does Indonesia's provincial proliferation incite conflict? According to Istania, regional proliferation at the provincial level escalates the conflict at the district level (2023). (Istania, 2023) is a lecturer at the Polytechnic School of Administration (STIA LAN), Jakarta. She finished her PhD at Loyola University Chicago, USA, and developed her dissertation into a book published by Routledge under the Contemporary Southeast Asia Series. The book, titled "Territorial Change and Conflict in Indonesia: Confronting the Fear of Secession," analyzes Indonesia's territorial autonomy strategy for the establishment of new provinces. The 2020-page book comes with a very simple cover that pulls the reader's attention solely on the title. The title suggests that the book will discuss territorial change that has incited secession conflict in Indonesia. For those interested in the interplay between territorial change and the secession movement in the context of local political contestation, the book is very compelling. The book is important for a deeper understanding of Sustainable Development, particularly in lessening the impact of development. Territorial change is believed to be effective in shortening bureaucracy to a better service delivery. However, the possibility of conflict is worth the calculation. The book offers a lesson learned from the case.

The book discusses the nexus between regional proliferation and socio-political conflict. Particularly, it discusses the district-level conflict, as districts are the force behind regional expansion at the provincial level. The objective is to identify the impact of the new province's aspirations on the conflict situation in the supporting districts. The author suggests that to analyze the dynamics of regional expansion at the provincial level, it is valuable to first look at the district-level political contestation and expansion process.

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Then, zoom in on the policy-making process and its level of potential conflict at each stage, namely the district, provincial, and national levels.

Since the reform era 1998, Indonesia has been undergoing regional proliferation by dividing the existing provinces or regencies into new provinces or regencies with smaller territories. In the period 1999–2012, Indonesia established eight new provinces. After a period of postponement, in 202, four more provinces were established as a proliferation of Papua Province and Papua Barat Province. The book's publication is timely in light of the establishment of Papua Tengah Province, Papua Pegunungan Province, Papua Selatan Province, and Papua Barat Daya Province. Coincidentally, the two mother provinces, namely Papua Province and Papua Barat Province, are located in the Papua region, the most conflict-prone region of Indonesia and plagued with secession issues.

This review pays attention to four main chapters of the book: chapters five, six, seven, and eight. It will be followed by a short critique and a conclusion with a rating.

### Writing Style and the Data

Taking examples from the cases of four districts in three provinces as the supporting administration for the provincial level of proliferation, the book dwells on the plan to establish a new province. Those districts are Bima Regency in West Nusa Tenggara Province, Cirebon Regency and Purwakarta Regency in Jawa Barat Province, and Tana Toraja in South Sulawesi Province. In these chapters, the author takes the reader through her fieldwork experience in a first-person story-telling style.

The data to calculate the conflict incidents as the basis of the study is from a political violence dataset from a national violence data collection known as SNPK or NVMS (Sistem Nasional Pemantauan Kekerasan; the National Violence Monitoring System Indonesia) during 2000–2014. As a note, the NVMS collects the data from local newspaper reports ([The Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Culture, n.d.](#)). The data is available to the public on the website.

### Political Conflict in Proliferation Planning

In chapters five and six, the book illustrates the cases of Bima and Cirebon regencies, which still need to claim new provinces.

From interviews, the book shows that when ethnic-based local elites cannot reach a consensus on power-sharing in Bima, their aspirations to form a new province fail. Because the ethnically based political groups were equally powerful, they were caught in a protracted conflict that thwarted the political consolidation they needed to claim the new province. The author also claims that "the high level of conflict in Bima can be causally related to economic marginalization and the lack of ethnic power-sharing in the West Nusa Tenggara Provincial government's top executive positions" (p. 115). The Cirebon case illustrates that groups' high diversity adds difficulties to political consolidation through ethnic identification, resulting in weak political power. The variety of ethnic groups unable to reach a consensus due to a lack of political consolidation means that violent conflict is less likely to occur, but at the same time, it also means that they are less likely to claim a new province successfully.

The study argues that the plan for proliferation accelerates conflicts during the initiation of a new province stage in the supporting districts due to group competitions supported by the local elites. It focuses on groups in the four regencies that utilize their identities to gather support for competition among them and against the national government for the new province campaign.

### How Conflict is Developed

In chapters seven and eight, the cases of Tana Toraja Regencies and Purwakarta Regencies, the author presents a different angle to show that the conflict persisted even though there was no intention to claim a territorial change in the two districts. The case of Tana Toraja illustrates that the intention to form a new province was absent when local elites were busy securing local political authority in their newly established districts. The conflict is based more on local contestation based on intra- and inter-

ethnic relations. The case of Purwakarta as a null case shows that the district elites had no intention of secession in either the claim of a new district or a new province. However, small conflicts still erupted in Purwakarta's social setting. In conclusion, the author highlights that the absence of regional expansion cannot be equated with the lack of violence in the region.

### **Conflict Mechanism**

The author concludes the book by describing the mechanisms between elite contestation during the new province campaign and the conflict. Those conflict mechanisms were first introduced in the early stages, introducing the idea of a new province to the public. Second, at the start of the campaign for a new province, groups use their ethnic identity for political support, which triggers conflict and a bargaining process between various groups. Third, the possibility of a failure of consensus among ethnic identity-driven groups will start a more intense battle, especially when the claim to a new province is rejected by the national government or mother province.

Finally, the author suggests that to ensure the smooth process of the necessary new provinces' development, "if a federal arrangement is not an option, the national government must tackle the situation most sensibly and strategically possible to maintain its unity" (p. 197).

### **Critics to Consider**

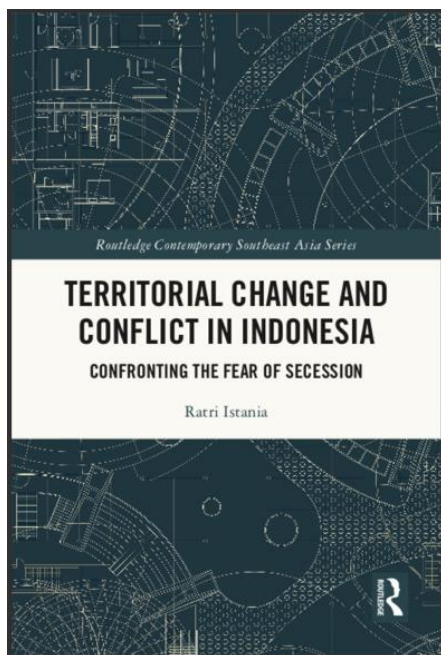
The book's attractiveness starts with its title, which aims to "confront the fear of secession." The title suggests that the book encourages the readers to face their fears of secession. However, the elaboration does not clearly explain what fears must be confronted. When reading the title, readers might expect that the book will discuss the risks of secession and self-determination in the sense of an independence movement or insurgency that threatens the territorial integrity of the state or its sovereignty. However, the introduction chapter explains that the book intends to explain secession in a more government-organizational sense—the withdrawal from one administrative entity to develop a new organizational entity. From a mother province to a new area. But then, in the conclusion chapter, chapter nine, the author returns to the hope of connecting the proliferation-related conflict with secession in the sense of the self-determination movement by briefly mentioning West Papua's independence ambition. The book is satisfactory in explaining the linkage between the development of new provinces and social-political conflict. However, the author's desire to link the proliferation-related conflict with nationalism and secession is the book's weakness since it is not proven throughout the discussion.

Second, presenting a null case by taking the Purwakarta case needs to be clarified since neither the intention for territorial change nor the fear of secession, as the main idea stated in the title, are present in the Purwakarta political sphere. The authors need to explain the reasoning behind explicitly choosing Purwakarta as the null case among other conflict-free and no proliferation aspirations districts in Indonesia, as conflict based on cultural modernization is not exclusive to Purwakarta, as a study (Kinseng,2021) shows.

### **Conclusion and Rating**

Overall, with the mentioned flaws, the book deserves an A-rating, as it is a meticulous work that deserves the attention of anyone interested in decentralization, conflict, and democracy. As a contribution to scholarship, the book sheds light on understanding decentralization strategy through regional autonomy in Indonesia.

## Cover Book



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