

Naming Indonesia's islands has implications for sovereignty

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Last month, the government announced its plan to register thousands of islands with the United Nations. The government is ready to make a submission to the UN after verifying at least 3,046 islands in 11 provinces. The verification also includes efforts to name thousands of previously nameless islands across the archipelago.

It is targeted that all islands in Indonesia's 15 provinces can be registered with the UN this month, bringing the project that started in 2005 to a close.

It has long been believed that Indonesia has more than 17 thousand islands, from Sabang to Merauke (west to east) and from Rote to Miangas (south to north). One official source states that there are precisely 17,504 islands in the archipelago.

But if that data is correct and has gained recognition from the international community including the UN, why would Indonesia need to register its islands? If the project is about naming islands, does that mean the islands really didn't have names before?

It does have to be admitted that not every single island we claim to be part of Indonesia has a name. One official has stated that there are more than 9000 nameless islands in Indonesia that have to be named before being registered with the UN (*The Jakarta Post*, June 11, 2007). This is a fact and this is what we are currently doing.

Toponymy is the term for island naming. It involves certain steps and procedures endorsed by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names (UNGEGN). Its twenty-fourth Session will be in New York this month, meaning Indonesia will have to submit its list of island names beforehand.

Article 121 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982 (UNCLOS), which Indonesia is a party to, provides the definition of what constitutes an island. In order to be recognized as an island, a feature in the sea has to meet several criteria, such as being naturally formed, always appearing on the surface of the sea and having the capacity to sustain human habitation. Surprisingly, as highlighted by Alex SW Retraubun at the Department of Ocean Affairs and Fisheries, around three thousand islands proposed by local governments did not meet these criteria. This means the number of islands in Indonesia could end up being less than that we used to believe.

Notwithstanding numbering, the naming of these islands is really about strategy for Indonesia. This is considered the first important step in developing and maintaining small islands. While this is important for economic development, it has an even more significant impact on national sovereignty.

Indonesia's outer islands play important roles regarding Indonesia's territorial waters and maritime boundaries with neighboring states. On many of those islands basepoints for Indonesia's baseline have been placed. The baseline is the line from which maritime jurisdictions (territorial sea, exclusive economic zones, and the continental shelf) are measured. This means that the existence of these small outer islands is vital.

This is the forward point from which our maritime claim is measured and maritime boundaries with our neighbors constructed. Simply speaking, toponymic activity (especially for the small outer islands) contributes significantly to Indonesian economic development, sovereignty and sovereign rights.

With regard to sovereignty and sovereign rights, it seems that there is a tendency for coastal states to claim more and more maritime area. Russia, for example, is currently conducting an expedition to the North Pole to claim that frontier. Around 50 scientists were sent off to the North Pole with a plan to place a titanium capsule containing a Russian flag on the seabed as evidence of Russia's claim.

Similarly, Australia declared its claim over the Antarctic seabed in 2004. This is another indication of the phenomenon of "creeping jurisdictions of coastal states". Is there any legal basis for their maneuvers?

What Russia is doing sparks controversy all over the globe. However, there is a legal reason for the movement. It is the UNCLOS that enables coastal states to claim continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles (M), which is also called extended continental shelf (ECS). Being state parties to the UNCLOS, Russia and Australia have the chance to submit their claim over ECS to the Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS).

Similarly, Indonesia also has chances to submit ECS to the CLCS. The deadline for the submission will be on May 13, 2009. Indonesia is currently conducting serious preparations, involving serious and careful technical, scientific and legal considerations in order for the submission to be accepted.

In addition, the cost for submitting ECS, including preparation, is undoubtedly not cheap. This naturally begs the question of whether it is all worthwhile. This might be difficult to answer, especially in the short term.

By securing more of the continental shelf, there is at least the hope of economic advantage in the future from potential oil and gas deposits. In addition, a claim could be a declaration of our national sovereign rights.

What Indonesia, Russia, Australia and other coastal states are doing is another way of declaring their existence. There is one important message they are delivering beyond mere economic considerations. That is securing their sovereignty and sovereign rights.

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