

From Forest to Struggle Space: Social Mobilization and Environmental Policy Intervention by the Tano Batak Indigenous People of Sihaporas Village

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ABSTRACT

Social movements in Indonesia, especially by indigenous communities such as Sihaporas Village, play an important role in protecting the environment from deforestation, natural resource exploitation and climate change. Sihaporas is a clear example of an indigenous community that is active in social movements to intervene in environmental policies. This research aims to understand the dynamics of the social movement of the Tano Batak indigenous community of Sihaporas Village, its impact on local environmental policies and the impact of conflict with PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL). The research method uses a qualitative approach, with a literature study method. Data collection techniques were obtained through books, news articles, scientific articles and non-governmental organization reports. Data analysis techniques in this research were carried out thematically, to identify patterns and main issues. The struggle of the Tano Batak indigenous people of Sihaporas Village against PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL) illustrates the conflict between industrial capitalism and the preservation of customary rights and the environment. They face environmental degradation, cultural destruction and physical violence due to TPL's exploitation, while the political and legal systems fail to protect them. Sihaporas' social mobilization, including active resistance and international solidarity, is important in supporting environmental justice and indigenous rights. This struggle demonstrates the importance of social movements in influencing public policy and ensuring environmental sustainability and the rights of indigenous peoples.

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INTRODUCTION

Social movements are becoming an important form of political participation in the struggle to change existing public policies, including in the focus of environmental policies. In the Indonesian context, these social movements are often at the forefront of efforts to protect the environment from the threats of deforestation, natural resource exploitation and climate change. In this case, indigenous communities play a strong role and can be considered as the core of the social movement. Indigenous communities in Indonesia typically mobilize communities to defend the land and natural resources they have managed for centuries. They are often at the forefront of efforts to protect the environment from the threats of deforestation, natural resource exploitation and climate change.

Sihaporas Village, North Sumatra, Indonesia, is one example of an indigenous community that plays an active role in popular social movements to intervene in environmental policy. The village is located in the Tano Batak region, Tano Batak is a terminology that refers to the geographical and cultural area inhabited by the Batak tribe in North Sumatra, Indonesia. The term symbolizes the ancestral land and origin of the Batak people, evoking sentiments of nostalgia and longing for their homeland (Saragih et al., 2023). Their efforts not only represent a desire for the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, but also illustrate resistance to major economic and political forces that tend to ignore environmental sustainability. In the midst of years of struggle, the Sihaporas Indigenous People still have hope for a fertile land and green forests. For the future of Indigenous Peoples, for future generations, and for the safety of the ecosystem (Ambarita, 2023).

For more than 25 years, the Sihaporas indigenous community has been in conflict with PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL). The Sihaporas began resisting the company's presence in 1998, after the fall of the New Order regime (BBC.com, 2024). They demanded recognition and protection of their customary territories, which had been recognized by the Dutch in 1916 but not by the Indonesian government (Karokaro, 2018). They resisted the presence of the TPL company, as it denied them their rights to the land and environment that they had inherited from their ancestors. In addition, they have conducted social and legal struggles to gain recognition and protection of their rights. It should be noted that the Sihaporas live off the forest by farming, extracting sap from palm trees and collecting medicinal plants for traditional rituals. However, these activities have been disrupted by PT TPL's operations, which aggressively exploit forest resources for industrial needs.

Seeing this, the author tries to see how the populist social movement of the Tano Batak indigenous community of Sihaporas Village can contribute to intervening in environmental policy in Indonesia. This research aims to understand the dynamics of social movements, their impact on local environmental policies, and the socio-economic effects of PT TPL's activities. This research is expected to provide a deeper understanding of the role of indigenous communities in environmental conservation and the development of fair and sustainable policies. In addition, this research is intended to fill the void of previous research on articles on the role of popular social movements in influencing environmental policies. This research not only adds to academic knowledge but also offers practical advice for policy makers, environmental activists, and indigenous communities to achieve

environmental sustainability that is just and respects Indigenous life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Patterns Previous research shows that community participation in environmental policymaking plays a crucial role of popular social movements. Tilly argues that social movements function as mobilization tools that enable marginalized groups to voice their demands and influence public policy (Tilly, 2004). The difference in this research is the focus on the specific dynamics of the popular social movement of the Tano Batak indigenous community of Sihaporas Village in the context of environmental policy in Indonesia, which has not been widely discussed in depth. In addition, the research highlights how social movements often rely on collective power to challenge larger power structures and realize social and political change (Scott, 1990). In contrast, this research focuses on indigenous communities in Sihaporas Village, popular social movements, and the impact of the conflict with PT Toba Pulp Lestari on environmental policy.

Various indigenous communities have shown resistance in demanding policies that threaten their traditional livelihoods and natural environment. In another study, the Samin indigenous people dared to resist because of their ecological spirit to maintain food security. In the case of the construction of a cement factory in Pati, the Samin indigenous people have realized their response in the form of a social movement to reject the cement factory mine, they feel they have the right as civil society to express their opinions as input for a social policy (Zarkasi et al., 2021). Similarly, the Kondh tribe in the Niyamagiri mountains opposes the exploitation of natural resources by the state and corporations, by organizing resistance to neoliberal development projects. The Kondhs have organized themselves to resist the neoliberal economic habits imposed by globalization and promoted by the state (Pandey, 2017).

Later, other research explained this resistance is often manifested through bottom-up social practices in shadow networks in the context of industrial disasters, community mobilization, and collective deliberation, as seen in the case of the Guarani and Tupinikim indigenous communities after the Fundão tailings dam breach (Cavalcanti, 2024). Indigenous peoples, who make up 5% of the world's population, are disproportionately present in environmental justice cases due to their defense of sacred values, livelihood needs, and opposition to extractivism, reflecting the rise of Indigeneity and self-determination (Martínez-Alier, 2023). Indigenous resistance to mining activities often involves protests, which illustrates the dynamic nature of resistance and responses from industry and the state. Indigenous women in particular often oppose mining due to concerns about its impact on their culture, land and livelihoods (O'Faircheallaigh, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative approach with a literature study method to understand the dynamics of the popular social movement of the Tano Batak indigenous community in Sihaporas Village. It provides a comprehensive understanding of the current state of knowledge, identifies gaps, and assists in formulating research questions and hypotheses (Snyder, 2019). Data collection techniques were obtained through books, scientific articles, news articles, and Non Governmental Organization reports. Data analysis techniques in this research were carried out thematically, to identify patterns and key issues related to social movements and the impact of conflict with PT Toba Pulp Lestari. This research is expected to provide an in-depth understanding of the role of the Tano Batak indigenous community in environmental policy change and the impact of conflict with PT Toba Pulp Lestari.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Background to the Conflict between Sihaporas Indigenous People and PT Toba Pulp Lestari

Sihaporas Indigenous Community is a community group located in Sihaporas Village, Pematang Sidamanik District, Simalungun Regency, North Sumatra Province. The Sihaporas indigenous community is inhabited by the Toba Batak tribe founded by Ompu Mamontang Laut Ambarita, who has lived in Sihaporas Village for generations (Brwa.or.id, 2019). His full name is Martua Boni Raja Ambarita, originally from Lumban Pea Ambarita in Toba Samosir. He is the ninth generation of the Batak Siraja lineage. The Sihaporas Customary Land area inherited from Ompu Mamontang Laut Ambarita consists of 1,948 hectares. Around 1913, Dutch colonizers borrowed the land from the fifth generation (Brwa.or.id, 2024).

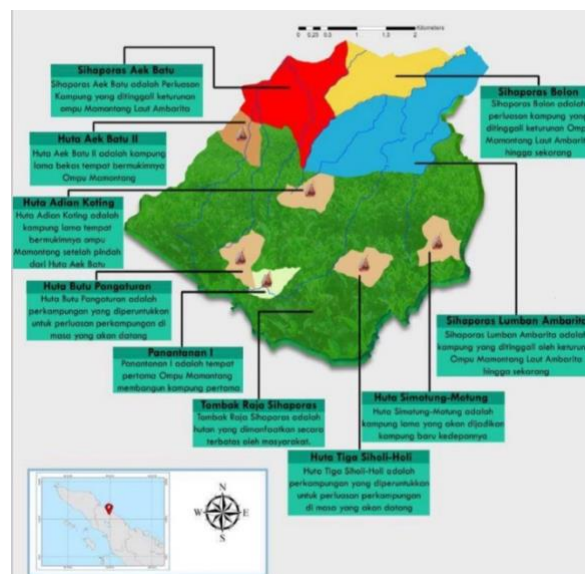


Figure 1. Customary Territory of Lumban Ambariat Sihaporas

Actually, Sihaporas land has been recognized by the Dutch and published in the 1916 Enclave map, on the map, three places or locations are written, namely Sihaporas, Sihaporas Bolon and Sihaporas Nagori Dolok. Evidence of the map is also available at the Ministry (Lumbanbatu & Karokaro, 2022). Until now, the descendants of Ompu Mamontang Laut Ambarita have reached 12 generations in Sihaporas Village (Ambarita, 2023)

The Beginning of the Conflict

It should be noted that there has been a protracted conflict between the Sihaporas indigenous community and PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL) since 1986. This conflict began when PT Toba Pulp Lestari claimed Sihaporas customary land as a concession area (Alinea.id, 2024). Approximately 1,500 hectares of Sihaporas customary land is included in PT TPL's concession. On this large expanse is a place where various herbal plants grow for traditional ritual purposes (Ambarita, 2023). Since the presence of PT TPL in the indigenous community's territory, the Sihaporas customary forest which is the source of life of the indigenous people has begun to be damaged. The destruction of the Sihaporas customary forest has had a direct impact on the lives of indigenous peoples, especially since the customary forest is part of their lives. Being a source of living needs and traditional rituals, the source of drinking water was damaged due to contamination by company pesticides, the Sihaporas indigenous people lost their customary territories, and experienced criminalization and intimidation (Ambarita, 2023).

This forest destruction has threatened the sustainability of traditional rituals, which are an important part of their identity and culture. Indigenous Toba Batak settlements are closely linked to the surrounding forests, springs and land, reflecting the strong connection between community livelihoods and natural resources (Ria, 2020). It was this environmental damage that triggered the resistance movement of the Sihaporas indigenous people, who sought to defend their rights and protect their culture and environment that were threatened by the exploitation and environmental damage caused by PT TPL. In trying to defend their rights and ancestral lands, the community not only faced environmental destruction that damaged their culture and livelihoods, but also experienced direct oppression. Police officers and PT TPL have arrested and physically assaulted them, an act that is not only considered criminalization but also a flagrant violation of human rights. This reflects a systematic attempt to silence their resistance and disregard the fundamental rights of indigenous peoples.

Traditions and Daily Life

The Ompu Mamontang Laut Ambarita Sihaporas indigenous community, they call their territory Huta Lumban Ambarita Sihaporas. In Batak language, huta refers to the unity of the village and the entire area is managed structurally by the community (Brwa.or.id, 2019). On the other hand,

the Sihaporas indigenous community has continuously inherited ancestral memories. This inherited memory is applied in the practice of daily life. This memory can be seen in the philosophy of life of the indigenous Batak people "Mardebata, maradat, maruhum, marpatik, martarombo, marpanghirimon, marpinompar" which means "god, custom, command, speech, hope, descent". One of the philosophies above, Mardebata means having faith in God the creator of the universe or called in the Batak language Debata Mulajadi Nabolon. Before outside religions entered Batak land, Debata Mulajadi Nabolon, he was the beginning and the end who created all the contents of the universe. Therefore, Batak indigenous people show a deep and close relationship with the Supreme Creator (Ambarita, 2023).

The daily life of the Sihaporas indigenous people is closely tied to their rich culture, where daily activities not only reflect traditional values, but also integrate rituals that are profound to life. Sihaporas customary elder Mangitua Ambarita explains that the daily life of the Sihaporas indigenous community is closely tied to a variety of cultural activities Customary ritual practices tied to ancestors are always carried out routinely, both when starting farming and during harvest activities and after harvesting (Ambarita, 2023).



Figure 2. Sihaporas Indigenous Community Celebrates National Culture Week

Source: (Aman.or.id, 2023)

This tradition reflects the manifestation of a philosophy of life as reflected in the principle of "Mardebata", which affirms a deep belief in God, the creator of the universe. It can be understood as a form of conception that integrates spiritual and cultural values in the social fabric of society. Every aspect of life reflects a deep spiritual and cultural connection, binding them to the ancestral land, and

at the same time playing a role in shaping the structure of customary ideology as a tool to strengthen social and cultural structures. These traditions are able to maintain cultural and social hegemony, with customary ritual practices serving to strengthen internal community cohesion and control over indigenous struggles and economic relations.

TPL Comes, Forest and Culture Gone

The arrival of PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL) is a source of problems for the Sihaporas, since the company claims and manages around 1,500 hectares of customary land as a concession, the forest that has been the center of life will be damaged. Land use that is not in accordance with customary principles, as well as ecosystem destruction by TPL's industrial activities such as logging and pesticide use, have threatened the sustainability of natural resources. Indigenous forests cannot be understood as a mere economic resource, but rather as a place to perform traditional rituals and a place to live, which when damaged will result in the loss of access to herbal ingredients in traditional ceremonies and rituals. Forest loss not only causes physical damage, but also breaks the spiritual and cultural connection between communities and their ancestors. Traditions and rituals that are closely intertwined with nature are severely jeopardized, weakening social cohesion and threatening culture.

The struggle against environmental degradation is one that not only demands land rights, but also seeks to defend the cultural and spiritual heritage that has existed for centuries, in the absence of recognition of their rights to customary land. The arrival of PT TPL and its impact on the forests and culture of the Sihaporas can be seen as a form of capitalist exploitation that places economic gain above community and environmental welfare. The destruction of the forest and loss of cultural heritage reflects a conflict that sacrifices community rights by subordinating them to the accumulation of surplus value that drives it. This clash will only continue to objectify the Sihaporas indigenous people who struggle to defend the environment, which has been an integrated part of their entity and existence.

Indigenous Peoples' Resistance and Social Mobilization Efforts

In understanding the struggle of the Sihaporas indigenous people, it is important to see it through the perspective of social movements. This looks at how collective efforts in changing social, economic and political conditions are fraught with injustice. Social movements play an important role in addressing inequality, discrimination and deprivation, with a long history of triggering major changes in societies around the world, such as the labor movement in Europe and the civil rights movement in the United States (Pais, 2023). Social movements can take political, cultural, and even religious forms and involve different cultures, discourses, identity politics, frames of mind, and emotions, as well as diverse goals, structures, and outcomes. Social movements are distinguished from other forms of collective behavior because they are organized, well-planned, and long-lasting.

They often mix scales, involving the actions of individuals and local organizations, as well as national institutions and policy-making bodies, and even transnational organizations, especially in global environmental issues such as pollution and climate change (Sovacool, 2022).

Social movements function as dynamic entities that bring about social change and innovation by organizing individuals and resources to achieve specific political or social goals. In the Sihaporas indigenous community, it is not a short time for the Sihaporas Indigenous People to fight to defend their customary territory, since 1998 until now (Ambarita, 2023). The Sihaporas indigenous community used various social mobilization strategies, namely demonstrations, road blocking, rehabilitating customary territories, and proposing to the government to issue customary recognition letters for their customary territories. Resistance is also carried out by building huts at the location of the former ancestral village, the point is the location of the former ancestral village of Buntu Pangaturan Sihaporas (Ambarita, 2023). They also held various traditional rituals at the disputed location, as a symbolic form of affirming their connection to the land and strengthening the legitimacy of their claim.

This strategy not only aims to pressure PT TPL and the government, but also to build solidarity among indigenous peoples and strengthen their collective identity. Solidarity is an important element in social movements, solidarity between individuals and groups in the same problem makes them to organize and fight against exploitation and oppression. On the other hand, the involvement of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and other advocacy networks involved, strengthened their resistance to PT TPL. The resistance of the Sihaporas can also be seen as part of a broader movement for environmental justice and indigenous rights. This movement links their local struggles to global issues such as climate change, environmental degradation and human rights, potentially creating a transnational network of solidarity that strengthens their struggle.

Indigenous Women's Resistance

The existence of PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL) has rejected the existence of indigenous peoples and created conditions for them as if they were not part of the history of Sihaporas. This is evidenced by the accusation of a PT TPL worker named Samuel Sinaga who said that the customary land protected and fought for by the Sihaporas indigenous people was not their ancestral land. Sihaporas indigenous women who heard this incident did not accept it. They were angry and considered Samuel Sinaga to have acted presumptuously by saying that the protected customary land was not part of the Sihaporas customary territory and accusing the indigenous people of being land burners. Sihaporas indigenous women then participated in blocking the road, even standing at the forefront (Ambarita, 2022).



Figure 3. Picture Indigenous Women of Sihaporas in Fighting for Customary Land

The mobilization of Sihaporas indigenous women shows that they not only play a supporting role in social movements, but also as the strength of the movement. When PT TPL and its workers, claimed that customary land was not part of their ancestral territory, indigenous women stood at the forefront of blocking roads and protesting such actions. This action asserted their identity and rights to the customary land that they have defended for generations. The resistance of Sihaporas indigenous women can be seen as a form of solidarity and collective resistance to oppression and exploitation. They not only defend their rights to customary land, but also against domination and oppression by large corporations such as PT TPL.

Impact of Struggle and Policy Intervention

The Sihaporas Indigenous People have been fighting to defend their customary territory for 25 years, since 1998 until now. Starting in 1998, the Sihaporas indigenous people have conveyed this issue to the government, but there has been no settlement process until now. In recent years, the authorities have often visited Sihaporas residents in the aftermath of indigenous peoples managing their customary territories and prohibiting TPL activities on customary territories (Hutanhujan.org, 2024). This struggle has claimed many victims, in the most recent incident on July 22, 2024, around 40-50 people stormed their location in trucks and pick-up trucks. The victims were kicked, dragged, and some even suffered head injuries even though there was no resistance from the victims

(Ppman.org, 2024). During the kidnapping incident, a house/mess was burned down by the arriving party; it is suspected that the burning of the house was done by the arriving party to scapegoat the burning incident to the Sihaporas indigenous people who were at the location at the time (Hutanhujan.org, 2024).

This incident not only demonstrates the forms of violence experienced by indigenous peoples, but also a systematic attempt to discredit their struggle. The acts of violence experienced by the Sihaporas indigenous community, including physical attacks and house burnings, reflect serious challenges in their struggle to defend their customary territories. These incidents underscore the government's failure to resolve the conflict and address the ongoing violence. Despite facing violence and oppression, the Sihaporas have repeatedly applied to the local and central government for customary recognition. They have also proposed to the government to issue a decree recognizing their customary territory. The community has also applied to the Simalungun District Government to issue a customary recognition decree. They have also repeatedly voiced their aspirations to the local and central government (BBC.com, 2024).

In addition to internal efforts, external support has also played an important role in this struggle. Organizations such as the Indigenous Peoples Defense Association of the Archipelago (PPMAN) and the Indigenous Peoples Alliance of the Archipelago (AMAN) have strongly condemned the acts of repression by the Simalungun District Police and PT TPL, and advocated for the recognition of the Sihaporas indigenous community. PPMAN will seriously monitor and collect supporting evidence related to the brutal actions of the Simalungun Police against the victims. Further efforts will be made so that similar actions are not repeated and the law must ensure the protection of indigenous peoples. PPMAN also encourages the National Police Chief and the North Sumatra Police Chief to conduct a thorough evaluation of the actions of their members. The National Commission on Human Rights (Komnas HAM) and Komnas Perempuan are also encouraged to conduct a thorough investigation in the field to find facts about the alleged human rights violations that occurred (Ppman.org, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS

The struggle of the Tano Batak indigenous community of Sihaporas Village against PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL) is a clear illustration of the conflict between industrial capitalism and the preservation of indigenous peoples' rights and environment. This conflict demonstrates how a large TPL company can place economic gain above indigenous rights and environmental sustainability. The Sihaporas have faced significant environmental damage, cultural destruction, as well as physical violence, as a result of TPL's exploitation of their resources. Despite more than two decades of struggle, their cause has yet to be fully recognized and adequately protected by the government. This highlights the failure of the political and legal system in addressing conflicts and the protection of

indigenous peoples' rights. The hardships faced by the Sihaporas, including environmental degradation, denial of customary rights, and systematic violence, expose systemic failures in protecting the rights of indigenous communities and the urgent need for more equitable policy reforms.

In the context of social movements, the social mobilization of the Sihaporas indigenous people involving various strategies, including active resistance and international solidarity, is an important aspect in supporting environmental justice and indigenous rights. Their struggle demonstrates the complex power dynamics in which local resistance can serve as a catalyst for broader change. Their efforts to gain recognition for their territories and defend their cultural heritage against national capitalist forces illustrate the importance of supporting social movements in efforts to influence public policy and ensure environmental sustainability and indigenous rights.

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