

## Social Movements and Digital Activism on Twitter: A Case Study of Development Conflict over the National Strategic Projects (PSN) Rempang Eco City in Batam

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the dynamics of social movements and digital activism in the context of the National Strategic Projects (PSN) Rempang Eco City development in Batam. The research applies Habermas's framework of the public sphere, emphasizing its inclusive and participatory nature, and extends this concept to digital platforms. The emergence of cyberspace has transformed traditional public spheres, enabling various societal actors to communicate and express dissent beyond spatial and temporal limitations. The Rempang Eco City project is examined as a case of agrarian conflict, highlighting the tensions between state-driven economic initiatives and the territorial rights of local communities. As of 2024, the issue remains prominent and widely discussed, with local disputes gaining visibility through digital media and contributing to the formation of counter-narratives. The study employs a qualitative netnographic approach and utilizes Social Network Analysis (SNA) to analyze Twitter (X) data collected from September 8 to 18, 2023. The analysis includes public sentiment, trending hashtags, identification of key actors, and the progression of online discourse. The results indicate that digital activism on Twitter has played a significant role in social mobilization related to the Rempang conflict. The SNA findings show that 65% of the networked conversations opposed residential displacement and criticized the reported use of force by authorities, demonstrating the effectiveness of digital platforms in shaping public opinion and supporting collective action.

**Keywords:** *Digital activism; social movements; social network analysis; agrarian conflict; and contentious politics*

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## INTRODUCTION

Infrastructure development and local resistance constitute a significant area of social contention in Indonesia. The present study examines the emergence of social movements and digital activism on Twitter (X) in response to the conflict surrounding the Rempang Eco City National Strategic Project (PSN) in Batam City. The agrarian conflict in Rempang arises not only from land scarcity but is also closely linked to state investment policies that prioritize foreign corporate interests and marginalize the rights and livelihoods of indigenous communities (Izka, 2024). Conflict fundamentally represents a divergence or clash of interests among actors pursuing specific objectives. All actors, whether individual or collective, are driven by distinct interests. Novri Susan (2023), in his article "Interest as a Mode of Reality: Answering the Crisis of Digital Society," defines interests as the subjective desires of actors that must be fulfilled through available resources, both material and non-material, within a particular social context (Susan & Singgih, 2023).

Lewis Coser's typology distinguishes between realistic and non-realistic conflicts. Realistic conflicts are grounded in specific, empirical, and material issues, such as disputes over land or natural resources, and are often addressed through negotiation or resource redistribution. In contrast, non-realistic conflicts arise from non-material and volatile factors, including religion, ethnicity, or identity (Susan, 2019). The Rempang case exemplifies realistic conflict, involving a prolonged land dispute among the Rempang community, the state, and PT. Makmur Elok Graha. The Rempang community considers the land ancestral heritage, representing a territorial claim predating Indonesian independence. This customary claim is contested by the issuance of a Land Cultivation Rights (HGU) title to PT. Makmur Elok Graha, which reclassifies the land as corporate property and leads to the displacement of the local population.

The proposed development is of considerable scale. According to Media Indonesia.com (2023), Rempang Eco City is intended to catalyze green industrialization and attract investments projected to reach IDR 381 trillion by 2080. Despite these ambitions, the state-led development vision has encountered substantial resistance from indigenous communities residing in the area. As a result, the resulting agrarian conflict extends beyond local disputes, engaging with broader global discourses on social justice, sustainable development, and community rights in the context of large-scale capital accumulation.

Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere offers a critical theoretical framework for analyzing the articulation and organization of resistance. Habermas (2015) defines the public sphere as a space for deliberation where individuals discuss matters of public concern and form collective opinion. The migration of this public sphere into digital spaces, particularly on platforms such as Twitter, has generated

new arenas for socio-political engagement. Social media enables interaction unconstrained by geographical or temporal limitations, making it a strategic tool for fostering solidarity and advancing advocacy campaigns (Jati, 2016). Within this digitized public sphere, the Rempang conflict has gained significant resonance.

The conflict intensified, culminating in a violent confrontation on September 7, 2023, at the Barelang IV Bridge (Kompas, 2023). This physical event was paralleled by a notable increase in digital activity. According to Indonesia Indicator (2023), between September 8 and 18, 2023, 3,828 Twitter accounts generated 485,026 activities related to the Rempang conflict. Additionally, 50 distinct hashtags were strategically employed to amplify the issue, elevating it to trending status and expanding its reach within public discourse. These empirical findings highlight the significant role of social media in constructing counter-narratives that challenge official government policies. Accordingly, this study aims to systematically examine these digital dynamics by investigating how Twitter served as a platform for social mobilization and discursive contestation during a critical phase of the Rempang Eco City conflict.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative approach with a netnographic design (Kozinets, 2010) to analyze digital activism and social movements in the Rempang Eco City conflict on Twitter (X). Netnography enables researchers to immerse themselves in online communities to understand symbolic interactions, discourse construction, and network dynamics within the digital public sphere. The research was conducted in the digital public sphere, specifically on the social media platform Twitter (X). The selection of this location was based on the platform's characteristics as a real-time public square that facilitates rapid discourse formation and social mobilization. The unit of analysis in this study is tweets, retweets, and reply threads uploaded during the observation period, with the scope limited to conversations using specific keywords and hashtags related to the conflict in Batam.

Data was collected through big data scraping using the Intelligence Socio Analytics (ISA) tool over a purposively selected period September 8-18, 2023 representing the peak of public discussion following the escalation of the land clearing conflict. Keywords and hashtags including #TolakPenggusuranRempang and #SaveRempangBatam guided data retrieval. Primary data from tweets, retweets, and replies were supplemented by secondary data from mass media archives, policy documents, and academic publications. Analysis integrated two approaches: Social Network Analysis (SNA) and Thematic Analysis. SNA mapped communication structures through centrality measures (degree, betweenness) to identify key actors and information brokers, with network visualization using Gephi software. Subsequently, qualitative analysis followed Miles and Huberman's interactive model data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing to examine public sentiment

(positive, negative, neutral) and dominant discourses on human rights, environment, and development. Validity was ensured through source triangulation, comparing Twitter data with media and official documents, and peer debriefing with academics in sociology and communication studies.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Trajectory of the Rempang Eco City Conflict: From State Planning to Popular Resistance**

The Rempang Eco City development project has a protracted planning history, dating back to 2004 when the state initially entered into a partnership with PT Makmur Elok Graha for the area's development. The project was subsequently designated a National Strategic Project (PSN) in 2023, with an ambitious projected investment target of IDR 381 trillion by 2080 (Kompas, 2023). This long gestation period underscores the state's sustained commitment to a particular vision of economic modernization for the region, a vision that implicitly frames the landscape as an inert space for capital accumulation rather than a lived, socio-culturally meaningful territory. The latent tensions embedded in this developmental vision erupted into open confrontation on Thursday, September 7, 2023. A clash occurred between security forces and local residents during land measurement activities preparatory to construction. This physical confrontation was not a spontaneous eruption of violence but the culmination of deep-seated grievances rooted in the proposed relocation. Residents, particularly the indigenous community inhabiting 16 old villages (kampung tua) on Rempang Island, vociferously opposed the displacement from homes and lands they have occupied for generations. These villages are not merely spatial coordinates on a map; they constitute the material and symbolic bedrock of the community's historical identity and cultural continuity.

The resistance expressed by the Rempang community does not constitute a wholesale rejection of development. According to Gerisman Ahmad, Chairman of the Keramat Rempang and Galang customary council, the community's position is not inherently anti-development. Instead, their objection targets a particular model of development that requires the erasure of their ancestral villages. This distinction is essential for understanding the nature of the conflict: it is a contestation over the terms of inclusion within the modernization project and a call for development to be reimagined in ways that preserve, rather than eliminate, existing communal life-worlds. The community's stance exemplifies a form of counter-conduct, opposing not progress itself, but the specific governmental rationality that equates progress with spatial dispossession. In the immediate aftermath of the September 7th clash, the dynamics of contention continued to evolve. The Batam Malay Youth Alliance (APM) strategically decided to cancel a planned rally on Monday, September 11, explicitly citing the desire to avoid a repeat of the previous violent confrontations. This decision reflects a tactical calculus within the broader social movement,

demonstrating an awareness of the repertoires of contention and the need to adapt strategies in response to state repression. Meanwhile, the state's response to the unrest was twofold: eight individuals were arrested in connection with the clash, while police officials claimed that 11 individuals affected by tear gas had returned to their homes after receiving medical treatment.

### **Discursive Contestations: The Pro and Contra of the Development Conflict over the National Strategic Projects (PSN) Rempang Eco City in Batam**

The controversy surrounding the Rempang Eco City National Strategic Project (PSN) on Rempang Island has intensified since early September 2023, generating a polarized landscape of public opinion. While a significant portion of public discourse has coalesced around opposition to the project's continuation, this opposition is not monolithic. Rather, it emanates from diverse societal actors, each mobilizing distinct cultural and moral frameworks to legitimize their stance. Prominent figures who have articulated opposition to the project include influential religious and civil society leaders: Ustadz Abdul Somad, a highly popular Islamic preacher; Abdul Mu'ti, representing the General Secretariat of the Central Board of Muhammadiyah (one of Indonesia's largest Islamic organizations); and Gus Yahya Cholil Staquf, the Chairman of the Executive Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU). The involvement of these figures is sociologically significant, as it signals the entry of powerful moral authorities into a conflict initially framed as a local land dispute, thereby elevating its national discursive salience. Ustadz Abdul Somad's intervention focused on the legal and humanitarian dimensions of the conflict.

Abdul Mu'ti of Muhammadiyah adopted a constitutional-historical argument. He contended that the Joko Widodo administration had failed to uphold its constitutional mandate by authorizing the eviction of a population that has inhabited the island since 1834 more than a century prior to Indonesia's proclamation of independence in 1945. This argument situates the conflict within a broader narrative of historical continuity and indigeneity, implicitly challenging the state's authority to unilaterally redefine the status of territorially embedded communities. Gus Yahya Cholil Staquf offered a more nuanced position that sought to reconcile the imperative of development with the demands of justice. While acknowledging the necessity of investment for national progress, he emphasized that the ultimate purpose of such investment must be the enhancement of citizens quality of life, particularly for those in directly affected areas. His statement reflects a form of conditional legitimacy.

In contrast, strong support for the project has been expressed by senior government officials, notably President Joko Widodo and the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs, Mahfud MD. While defending the project, both acknowledged significant shortcomings in its implementation. They revealed that an agreement on the relocation and compensation of Rempang Island residents had been finalized the day before violent clashes erupted on September 7.

Importantly, they admitted that inadequate communication about the agreement and its compensation terms led to confusion among the community. President Widodo indicated that residents had reportedly agreed to receive 500 square meters of land and a type-45 house, but this information was not communicated effectively, which contributed to the ensuing tensions. Minister Mahfud MD added that 80 percent of residents had approved the relocation during a meeting on September 6, but the absence of clear information dissemination served as a direct catalyst for the conflict.

### Digital Activism on Twitter as a Digital Public Sphere

As a social media platform predicated on real-time interaction, Twitter has played a significant role in articulating resistance to the Rempang PSN. The platform's affordances its hashtag functionality, retweet networks, and capacity for rapid information diffusion have transformed it into a critical arena for what Habermas conceptualized as the public sphere, albeit in a digitally reconfigured form. In the Rempang conflict, Twitter functioned not merely as a space for information dissemination, but as a site of discursive contestation where counter-hegemonic narratives could be constructed, amplified, and mobilized against state-endorsed development discourse.



*Source: Indonesia Indicator (2023)*

**Figure 1.2** Word cloud of Rempang Conflict Issues (8-18 September 2023)

Hashtags emerged as particularly potent tools for social mobilization, serving as discursive anchors around which disparate actors could coalesce. Tags such as #TolakPenggusuranRempang, #RakyatBangkit, and #SaveRempangBatam functioned as collective action frames, unifying diverse groups to voice shared aspirations and grievances. These hashtags transcended their function as mere metadata; they became symbolic rallying points, enabling the formation of what Bennett and Segerberg (2012) term "connective action" a form of collective engagement characterized by personalized content sharing over traditional organizational membership. The following section presents the results of the Social

Network Analysis (SNA) mapping of Twitter users' perceptual patterns during the period of September 8-18, 2023. This analysis illuminates the structural dynamics of the digital public sphere that emerged around the Rempang conflict, revealing key actors, influential nodes, and the flow of discourse within this networked space.



Source: Indonesia Indicator and Ministry of the State Secretariat (2023).

**Figure 1.3:** SNA Map of Twitter Users Perceptions of the Rempang Conflict

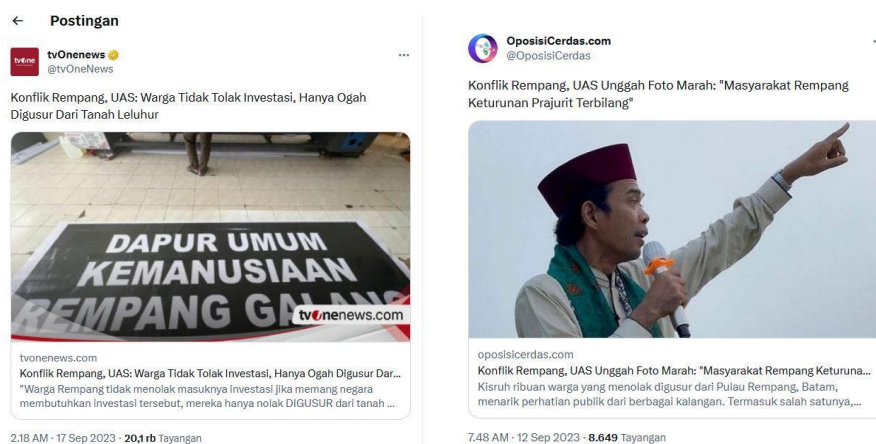
The results of the SNA data analysis are as follows:

<b>The Anti-Relocation Group 65%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This group firmly articulated its rejection of the Rempang Island residents' relocation. Strong condemnation was directed at what they perceived as the anarchic actions perpetrated by authorities against the Rempang community.</li> <li>• Several accounts amplified the rhetoric of "people power," accompanied by the hashtags #TolakPenggusuranRempang and #SaveRempangBatam, to mobilize opposition to the relocation.</li> <li>• The hashtag #RakyatBangkitPeoplePower (#PeopleArisePeoplePower) also emerged as a discursive tool to draw parallels with, and amplify the exposure of, similar cases of land dispossession across Indonesia, including Mandalika, Gili Trawangan, and Wadas.</li> <li>• There were escalating calls for National Police Chief General Listyo Sigit to remove Nugroho Tri Nuryanto from his position as Bareleng Batam City Resort Police Chief.</li> <li>• Demands intensified for the suspension, or even the revocation, of the Rempang Eco-City project's status as a National Strategic Project (PSN), on the grounds that it is deeply flawed. This critique extended to other PSNs, which were also referenced as frequently generating conflict.</li> <li>• Critical responses proliferated regarding President Joko Widodo's assertion that the conflict stemmed from miscommunication over the residents' relocation.</li> </ul>

Public intellectual Rocky Gerung characterized the President's statement as emanating from an "empty mind."
<b>The Counter Government Stance within the Anti-Relocation Group 15%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The account @OposisiCerdas emerged as an influential media actor within this cluster.</li> <li>• This counter-government account leveraged the Rempang case as evidence supporting calls for President Joko Widodo's impeachment.</li> <li>• President Jokowi's remark "masa urusan kayak gitu sampai presiden" (colloquially: "Don't tell me an issue like this has to go all the way to the President") was widely criticized as demonstrating a lack of empathy.</li> <li>• Similarly, Minister of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning (ATR) Hadi Tjahjanto's statement that Rempang Island residents lacked land ownership certificates drew criticism for its perceived absence of empathy.</li> </ul> <p>In contrast, Anies Baswedan was lauded for his courageous and firm stance in defending the Rempang community. This sentiment was framed within a broader public desire for change from the current administration.</p>
<b>The Pro-Government Group 12%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The account @ShamsiAli2 provoked discourse by quoting Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Pandjaitan's threat to deploy bulldozers against those hindering investment in Indonesia. This statement was then deliberately augmented with the phrase: "including Rempang residents, who will be swept away if they become rioters and obstacles to investment."</li> <li>• However, other accounts attempted to report Imam Shamsi for disseminating this hoax information.</li> </ul> <p>Allegations emerged suggesting that foreign actors were interfering in the Rempang conflict with the intention of dividing the nation.</p>
<b>The Neutral Group 8%</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This cluster comprises accounts that attempted to contextualize or clarify the government's explanations. One focal point was President Joko Widodo's assertion that the Rempang issue stemmed from miscommunication.</li> <li>• Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs Mahfud MD's deliberate use of the term "land clearing" (pengosongan lahan) as opposed to "eviction" (penggusuran) generated both support and criticism, sparking debate over the parameters of humanitarian consideration.</li> </ul> <p>There were calls for National Police Chief General Listyo Sigit to act impartially in addressing the alleged anarchic actions in Rempang</p>

An analysis of actor interactions on Twitter regarding the Rempang Eco City National Strategic Project (PSN) conflict demonstrates that social media, particularly Twitter, operates as a competitive discursive arena. In this context, the platform extends beyond simple information dissemination, functioning as a mechanism for

amplifying issue salience and broadening public participation. Data indicate that approximately 65% of Twitter posts expressed negative sentiment and opposition to the relocation of Rempang residents. This predominance suggests that counter-narratives were more effective in fostering solidarity and mobilizing public opinion than pro-government discourses.



**Figure 1.4** Influential Twitter Posts Related to the Rempang Conflict

Drawing on Gerbaudo's (2017) periodization of digital activism, this conflict exemplifies the second phase of activist evolution, characterized by the affordances of social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Twitter) that enable rapid discursive mobilization, as distinct from the first phase (1990s) of independent news sites and mailing lists. Twitter emerged as an effective vehicle for articulating public aspirations and contesting controversial development projects within the digitally reconstituted public sphere. Paskarina (2020) contends that digital media possesses the dual capacity to both strengthen and weaken democratic practices. In this instance, digital platforms functioned as an alternative public sphere, not merely activated during electoral moments, but continuously deployed to voice societal grievances.

The discursive formations on Twitter foregrounded state repressive actions and governmental transparency deficits, thereby reinforcing negative sentiment toward the project. Influential accounts, including @OposisiCerdas and @tvOneNews, played pivotal roles in expanding the issue's reach, demonstrating how social media actors shape public opinion through strategic narrative amplification. Furthermore, the strategic deployment of visual media, infographics and video content, within Twitter threads intensified the counter-narrative's impact, enabling more effective message dissemination. It can be concluded that Twitter operates not simply as a communicative platform, but as a potent instrument of social mobilization in the Rempang PSN development conflict. This phenomenon substantiates the proposition that social media constitutes an effective arena for

advancing community rights claims and demanding state accountability.

## CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that Twitter interactions related to the Rempang Eco City National Strategic Project (PSN) conflict illustrate the platform's role as an effective deliberative and contestatory discursive arena for social movements and digital activism. Notably, 65% of Twitter posts expressed negative sentiment toward the relocation of Rempang residents. Counter-narratives fostered solidarity, transcending geographical and social boundaries, and mobilized public opinion more effectively than pro-government discourses, which were largely restricted to official channels and did not resonate organically within networked publics. Digital activism enabled citizens to articulate their aspirations concerning contentious public issues. The digital sphere served as a reconfigured public space, continuously facilitating the expression of dissent toward state actions beyond electoral periods. Influential accounts, such as @OposisiCerdas and @tvOneNews, together with the strategic use of visual media, amplified the impact of counter-narratives. Consequently, Twitter functioned as a powerful instrument for social mobilization, advancing community rights claims and demanding state accountability within the context of this conflict.

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