

Batam Island - Indonesia's Pathetic Attempt to Create A Second Singapore

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This time it was really supposed to work! The turbo-capitalist, anti-Communist and obedient Indonesia got so used to hearing bizarrely inflated compliments from its Western handlers, that it began to believe that it finally could do it - to build at least one dignified, livable urban center complete with sidewalks, public parks, public transportation, sport facilities and decent cultural institutions. At least one showcase city that could shine and attract millions of visitors from abroad, while all its major urban centers like Jakarta, Surabaya or Medan have been, for years and decades, collapsing and increasingly resembling a hell on earth.

A bright star on that polluted and dark sky over Indonesia was supposed to be Batam, a series of isles called Riau Islands Province, near the Strait of Malacca, only some 20 km from Singapore's South coast.

The dream was big, but unrealistic. Now almost everything is lost.

Even the otherwise pro-establishment English language Indonesian daily *The Jakarta Post* reported on June 16, 2017, in the most panicky 'voice':

"Batam Mayor Muhammad Rudi said he has reported to **President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo** and **Economic Coordination Minister Darmin Nasution** about the island's worsening economy, though it had been designed to serve as the center for Indonesia's economic growth.

'I underlined in my report that Batam was in an emergency state. The central government needs to take immediate action to save Batam,' Rudi said in Batam, Riau Islands, on Thursday.

The Batam Manpower Agency recorded that about 300,000 of the island's workers have lost their jobs this year.

'During the recent visit of President Jokowi to Batam, I told him about massive layoffs from the closing of factories. He promised to take immediate action, but the promise has not been fulfilled yet,' Rudi added."

Wherever one goes, or more precisely wherever one drives (as elsewhere in Indonesia,

there are hardly any sidewalks or public spaces on the islands of Batam), the faces of the people of Batam radiate deep disappointment, sadness and confusion.

They usually do not start talking unless approached. But when they begin, their speech turns quickly melancholic.

Mr. Bely, a driver of the PT. Ananda Aditya company in Batam, expressed brutally what exactly lies behind the official numbers:

“Recently, there were 180 companies that closed down their branches here, and all of them had to lay off their employees. So it was back to ‘sin industry’.

Batam’s most lucrative business used to be gambling and prostitution. But now, they also closed down many gambling dens. Prostitution survived and number of women selling themselves is increasing, but women in this sector are more and more desperate. Many tourists stopped travelling here, because there is no more gambling. Batam is not washed with money, anymore.

These islands are a popular destination for those who are urgently trying to find a job, so many people come here, from all over Indonesia. They don’t know that jobs are not as easy to find as before. The unemployment numbers are rising.

Batamindo is the area where various industries of Batam are located. Among them are electronics and cosmetics. Or they used to be... Lately, anything goes: they say that even the sand for the reclaimed land used for the iconic Marina Sands in Singapore, has been extracted and exported from Batam.”

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On this chain of islands, nothing went as expected.

Batam was supposed to be the first urban area in the turbo-capitalist and corrupt Indonesia: a huge modern city with tree-lined avenue, sidewalks, public transportation and – some even dared to hope – public parks and playgrounds for children.

Across the water, just a 50 minutes sail from ‘downtown’ Batam, one of the richest cities on earth, Singapore, boasts one of the highest quality of life on Earth. There, a futuristic metro (MRT) that covers almost the entire island, and modern double-decker buses take well-groomed and educated passengers to elaborate bookstores and avant-garde art galleries. Top research institutions, public libraries, museums, concert halls and exhibition halls both educate and entertain the citizens. Almost everywhere in Singapore people live in high-quality, subsidized public housing.

Socialism and capitalism are rubbing shoulders in Singapore. Some love it, others hate it, but one thing is undeniable: healthy and educated Singaporeans can stay and enjoy life in their city-state. Or they could go anywhere in the world (visa free), and be certain that they will make it – as artists, academics, researchers, managers, whatever...

Most of the poor, uneducated people from fundamentalist-capitalist Southeast Asian countries can only end up as untrained laborers in the Gulf, or worse.

Indonesian ‘planners’, including one of its former presidents – Habibie (he took over the

presidency after Suharto stepped down) - saw Singapore and they salivated. They wanted something similar or even precisely the same.

But Singapore cannot be replicated, as China cannot be, as Russia cannot be. To build these countries, took generations and generations of dedicated and educated, optimistic men and women.

Batam tried to copy the facades and skyline of Singapore. But its foundations were made of clay, lacking ideology, enthusiasm, talent and determination.

At the beginning, as bulldozers and cranes went to work, everything looked vaguely familiar, at least from a great distance. Then, nothing looked recognizable, anymore. Entire structures began collapsing, before they were completed.

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Breaking of fast or the oldest profession?

This time, I visited Batam during the Muslim fasting months of Ramadan. In the evening, during the breaking of the fast, three stunningly beautiful and elegant women were sitting at a nearby table. They were modestly dressed, and one of them was holding a baby in her lap. Their heads were covered.

But my friend, Ms. Monica, working at a front desk of an international hotel, destroyed all my illusions:

“Have you seen them? These are upper class escort women. I am ashamed with Batam’s reputation as prostitution island, but what can we do – it is true. Prostitution is everywhere here. Guests of this hotel often bring their women with them. Men using these services are not only Singaporeans, many are also Indonesians. Even girls who look like pious Muslims are selling themselves.

The sex workers are not only those who are working in the raunchy night clubs or bars, but there are also many students from the local universities. We called them ‘ayam kampus’ (‘campus chicken’). I think they call them the same in Java.”

I asked Monica about Batam’s dream of becoming the second Singapore. She replied, gloomily:

“It is a very big contrast between Singapore and Batam. Yes, the Indonesian government used to promise that Batam would be like another Singapore. I don’t know what went wrong. Now Batam Authority (Otorita Batam) is under the Central government again. Not much is improving.”

She added another cliché, after a while; one that many have been told to repeat, all over Indonesia:

“But Singapore only has 5 million people to take care of while Indonesia has more than 200 million. It is much easier for Singapore to thrive, isn’t it?”

I mentioned China, with at least four times more people than those living in Indonesia; a country that has left most of the Southeast Asian nations far behind.

Monica remained silent. She has never visited China or any other part of the world. She only knew Indonesia and Singapore.

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Mr. Masrun Sinaga, a waiter at the Golden Fish Restaurant, sees with his own eyes how Batam is losing jobs at an increasing speed:

“I can confirm that many companies closed down their factories here. Some moved to Thailand, others to Malaysia. One of the biggest of them – McDermott – dramatically reduced its operation here, recently. I know, because they had their farewell party at this restaurant. Those who were at the party were mostly their foreign employees and managers. Poor fired employees were not invited.”

300 thousand jobs lost in just one year, on an island with roughly 1.2 million inhabitants!

Like the rest of Indonesia, Batam does not produce almost anything 'indigenous' - it is hosting *maquiladoras*, mainly from the West, Japan and South Korea. Practically, still relatively cheap and unskilled labor is assembling what was developed somewhere else. When minimum wages move higher (as happened in Batam), most of the companies migrate somewhere else. As there is hardly any Indonesian industry to speak of, such places as Batam go down, into free fall.

Mediocre technocrats like Habibie ('educated' in Germany), were heavily indoctrinated by the pro-market dogmas. Their theories failed, reducing Indonesia to a country which keeps plundering its own resources on behalf of mostly Western multi-national companies, while keeping its citizens in servitude to big business and modern-day feudal lords.

The results are predictable: environment is ruined, while the cities and villages are precisely like in the feudal days, now only with stereotypically assembled malls and a few international hotels; with dangerous and cheap scooters (wishfully called motorbikes) and, because of the notorious lack of public transportation, legendary traffic jams - something that should be absolutely ridiculous in a desperately poor country like Indonesia.

At the Sekupang neighborhood, I saw two middle-aged women, sitting aimlessly near a polluted waterway. One came from Jember, East Java, while the other from Palembang in Sumatra. They stared at me, a foreigner, in surprise. I asked them about 'the second Singapore'. They replied, still amused:

"Yes, the previous government promised Batam to become a second Singapore. It has not been realized yet, as you can see.

Life is difficult. I don't even think about going back home to Palembang for Idul Fitri holidays. I cannot afford it - it is so expensive to go there. Life is so expensive."

These women are not losing hope. Perhaps one day things could change, improve:

But it depends on the Mayor. We still hope that Batam will be more like Singapore in the future."

A few steps from where they sat, a child suffering from malnutrition, is absent-mindedly munching on blue paint he peels from a window frame.

There are slums all over Batam, there is misery, like everywhere in Indonesia. It does not appear richer or poorer than the other cities of the archipelago. Things look familiar: no concert halls and no research centers. Only five bus lines that are operating tiny and primitive buses - that is all that is disguising itself as 'public transportation', in an urban area of more than 1 million inhabitants.

There is hardly anything to look forward to, here. Only, perhaps, a trip to Singapore, or marriage to a foreigner, an escape.

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Ramadan. During the fasting month, the warehouses of Batam are open only from 9 pm to 1 am, but they are open. Speedboats from Singapore are still packed, shuttling concerned-looking men, sugar daddies, husbands in need of second wives.



Chilli Bar in Batam

I spoke to Ms. Mira, who works at a small store (warung), which doubles as a bar in Batam's neighborhood called Nagoya. She laughs, bitterly, whenever I ask some uncomfortable questions:

"I don't know why I came to Batam, but I did; from Lombok. It was not easy to get a job here. I finally worked at Chilli Bar here at Nagoya Town, at that corner, look... not far from here. I used to make grand total of Rp. 3 million (about US\$ 240). And that already included my salary, tips and drink commissions. I heard that in better bars, women could earn up to Rp. 5 million, with the same structures of payment."

Finally, I went to *Chilli Bar*, and it was clearly a brothel, a den, with girls dancing in their skimpy clothes, with a transvestite mixing cocktails; a place where there are no secrets, where everything is raw and open. A middle-aged sex-worker, Ms. Jemmy, is from Palembang. She is bitter and tough, and at the same time as melancholic as a character from Chekhov's play:

"I have 17-year-old kid now. I was pregnant when I was very young, her age, at 17.

First, I went to work in Singapore, then I moved to Batam to work in a casino. At that time, gambling was thriving here. But then it became restricted, only five places that could have gambling on their premises. So, I would work for 2

weeks and then not work for 2 months. I have a kid to raise, so I moved; I began working in this bar in order to make ends meet.

I would do anything to survive. If customers want to be with me for a night, that's OK. At one point, I became a 'second wife' of a Singaporean businessman who had been travelling regularly to Batam. But then, things did not work out as planned. We broke up.

I don't have plans to go back home to Palembang for Idul Fitri holidays. I have to earn more money first, to be able to do that. Anyway, I am not looking forward to the holidays. It is already bad during Ramadhan - the bars can only operate from 9pm to 1am. Such a short time. Yes, not enough time to get many customers. That means less earning for us. Usually we started to open at 3pm and could stay open until early hours, especially on the weekends."

Tens of thousands of Indonesian women are drawn to Batam, as hundreds of thousands are drawn to Bali. The legend goes: anything could happen here. Life could change. Prince Charming may appear from nowhere.

But miracles hardly happen. Charming Princes that travel here, are usually just some tough Singaporean businessmen, who know precisely what they want. Most of them, once they get it, rush back to their bubble, to a highly conservative lifestyle.

But Indonesian reality is too dreadful and the dream of easy escape too bright. Desperate women keep coming.

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Can the economy of an entire island with more than 1 million inhabitants be sustained by such 'dreams? It appears that it has to be. Factories are closing down. Real, 'decent' tourism has nothing to offer to foreigners who are drawn as if by some powerful magnet to the neighboring lights of Singapore.

Indonesian Batam cannot compete. It has only those few second-rate malls, mainly stuffed with counterfeit merchandise. There is nothing unique here, nothing impressive, nothing truly beautiful.

What was the former **Vice-President B. J. Habibie** really thinking? What did he want to achieve here in Batam, in those 'heady' (but in truth, totally wasted) post-Suharto years?

What is here, really; what is here now, in Batam? A few pits from terrible mining ventures,

few badly paved roads and dirty polluted waterways. One huge sunken ship. Few slums. Few 'white elephants' - unfinished tall buildings, hotels and condominiums.

Fundamentalist capitalism is badly failing in Indonesia, as it is failing all over Southeast Asia. (please refer to my latest book: "[Revolutionary Optimism, Western Nihilism](#)"). It is good to know that it is. The sad thing, however, is that local people, indoctrinated and programmed, are being forced to pay a terrible price. They are not protesting, not rioting; they are mostly suffering silently.

Entire generations are wasted. Almost no one in Indonesia is still aware how bad things have really got. It is 'top secret', hidden by the corporate media, hidden by the indoctrinated academia.

Those few who are aware are blaming the circumstances, and the corrupt individuals. Almost no one is blaming the regime - the entire system - injected by the West.

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One bizarre relic on the islands of Batam, is a former refugee camp for Vietnamese 'boat' people. It is located on the island of Galang. This gloomy compound has been turned into a badly maintained, but still fascinating museum. Or you can call it an anti-Communist propaganda monument. Barracks are on display, as well as now rotting boats that used to bring opponents of the Vietnamese Communist Revolution to this part of the world.

Now, Vietnam which had been reduced to a rubble by the imperialist assault from the West, is a Communist (with mixed economy) middle-income country. It has bypassed Indonesia in many fields. Its population is educated and enthusiastic, and its cities are blooming.

I asked a construction worker from East Java, who was working on the premises of the museum, what he knew about the Vietnam War. He was curt:

"This island was for the refugees from Vietnam. But I don't know about the history. Nobody told me anything. I just started this work on repairing the boats, because they are already falling apart."

Mr. Adi, now a resident of Batam but originally from Pontianak, knew much more:

"Refugees in Galang Island were the results of the civil wars in Vietnam, and the intervention from the West, just like what is happening now in Syria."

On the way back to the main, northern part of Batam, I noticed a fence. I stopped the car and went to look. Behind the wires, there was a lake. At the edge of it, an eerie site - a sunken village. Only roofs of houses and a mosque were now visible. All the rest was under the water. "What is this?" I asked. A dam. A badly planned artificial lake. Another disaster, another failed 'project'.

One hour later I photographed a slum, but it was *biasa*, a 'usual stuff', just like anywhere else in Indonesia.

Next day I landed in Singapore, and it was *biasa* again, but only from the point of view of

one of the richest places on Earth: tickets for the concert of my favorite Argentinian concert pianist Martha Argerich, were hopelessly sold out. But I managed to attend a great (free) concert at a magnificent Esplanade concert hall. Changi Airport, the best in the world, just opened its Terminal 4, which was designed as a cozy ancient Chinese town in Southeast Asia. The Singapore metro extended enormously, since my last visit. *Biasa*, you know, usual stuff... for Singapore.

There is no place on Earth where the contrasts between the super-rich and poor worlds would be so close to each other.

Only 20 kilometers between a bizarre crypto socialist and monstrously rich Singapore and the colonized, robbed, poor and brainwashed super-capitalist Indonesia.

Two different planets. Two different realities.

This contrast never appears in the European or North American mainstream press. The West loves Indonesia as it is now: plundered, defeated, indoctrinated.

No matter what the Western demagogues say, Southeast Asia cannot be governed by capitalist doctrines. When it is, its people are forced to live in unimaginable misery.

But the truth is: there cannot be a “second Singapore” or “second Shenzhen”, not even “second Danang”, anywhere in an Asian country which puts greed and profit above well-being of its people and the social structures.

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