Chicks and Chicken: Singapore’s Expansion to Riau

By Fred Coelhboj

Since the British founded Singapore in 1819 the city has been a transportation hub and communication centre. After Independence (1959) and the construction of high-rise housing and skyscraper offices could reduce the pressure on land for only a limited amount of time.

Mega-urban development in the city-state took a decisive turn with the concept of the Singapore-Johor-Riau (SIJORI) Growth Triangle. Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew launched this concept in 1959 at a time when the industrial development within the boundaries of the city-state reached its saturation point and when costs of land and labour were rising sharply. The basic idea was that the three regions pool their human and natural resources in order to attract new investors. Each corner of the triangle would put in its respective comparative advantage: Singapore its capital, technical skills, and management; the Malaysian state of Johor its land and semi-skilled labour; and the Indonesian province of Riau also its land and cheap labour. In reality, SIJORI does not represent a tripartite partnership but an arrangement by which Singapore’s mega-urban growth can freely spill over into the territories of its neighbours (Macleod and McGee 1996: 445). Singapore was, and is, clearly in control: it took the initiative, and it provided the capital and management.

Fatal attraction?
The encroachment of Singapore’s mega-urban region into Riau started on Batam, the island just south of Singapore. A series of bridges connects Batam to six other islands, which lie in a string to the south of Batam. Every hour-forty speedboats leave Singapore for the thirty-minute ride to Batam, which has evolved as an industrial centre and a tourist resort. The rise in the number of tourists in Batam is impressive: from none in 1983, via 60,000 in 1989, to 606,000 in 1997, 78 per cent of whom Singaporeans and 10 per cent Malaysians. In 1994, 1.2 million foreign tourists arrived at Batam airport, thus surpassing Sukarno-Hatta airport in Jakarta.

The island of Bintan is a freshwater reservoir for Singapore; an undersea pipe brings the water to the city. Bintan has also been developed as a tourist resort for the thirty-minute ride to Batam, which is connected to Singapore by a cable car. Bintan is a centre of agricultural production. It was expected to have about 400,000 pigs by 2000, enough to provide 50 per cent of Singapore’s demand for pork. A coconut farm of 55,000 hectares provides leaf and meat. Chicken production serves all the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets of the region. Pulau will, surely, also become the world’s largest supplier of orchids. Karimun is used for oil quarries and shipyards, two pre-eminently space-consuming activities. Singapore will be developed into a centre for ship-breaking yards. Over a hundred permits for sand quarries have been issued in the past few years; several investors have obtained a far higher price and there were questions about who had pocketed the price difference. After the loss of the political initiative, the Salim Group had offered a far higher price than the government was willing to give. After the year in which tourist visits declined by 89 per cent, the demonstrators were chased away from the resort. Environmental NGOs that express their worries about the sand quarries first and foremost point to the Indonesian authorities that give out too many concessions or do not stop illegal quarries. Singapore’s influential role yet remains in the background.

References


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