

Indonesia: How a new capital is failing.

A capital city is often the most important city in a country, usually determined by historical, political, or legal reasons. However, the capital is by no means always the best-known or largest city in a country. Take Ottawa, for example—while many people are more likely to think of Toronto or Vancouver—or Canberra instead of Sydney or Melbourne. There are also countries with unique arrangements regarding their capital cities. For example, South Africa officially has three capitals: Pretoria (executive), Cape Town (legislative), and Bloemfontein (judicial). Switzerland and Nauru have (technically) never officially had a capital, although Bern is regarded in practice as the capital of Switzerland.

Sometimes capitals change entirely. When Germany was divided after World War II and Berlin was located in East Germany, West Germany needed a new capital: Bonn. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Berlin once again became the capital of a reunified Germany. Brasília was also built specifically as Brazil's new capital to stimulate economic and political development further inland, something that had become more difficult in the overcrowded city of Rio de Janeiro.

But these days, another country is once again building a completely new capital. Only, for now, this city looks more like a gigantic ghost town than the future political center of a world power. We're talking about Nusantara, the future capital of Indonesia.

But why is a new capital actually needed? What's wrong with Jakarta? And why are so few people moving to Nusantara for now? You'll find answers to these questions in this article.



Flag Indonesia. Source: wikipedia.org



Busy Jakarta

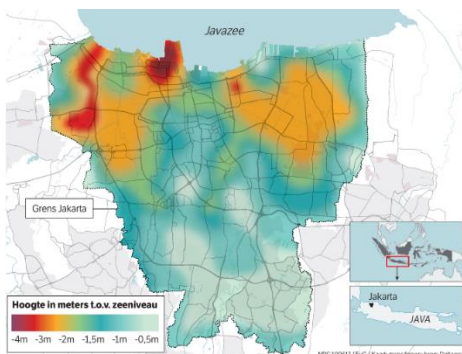
Jakarta has been the capital of Indonesia for many years. With a metropolitan area of tens of millions of residents, Jakarta is one of the largest urban areas in the world. It is therefore not surprising that this city in particular became the political and economic center of Indonesia. Among other institutions, the Supreme Court and the House of Representatives are located in Jakarta, and the city is situated on the country's most densely populated island: Java. Nearly half of Indonesia's total population lives on Java.

Yet Jakarta faces enormous challenges. The city is built on marshy ground, suffers from extreme traffic congestion, and has struggled with pollution and overpopulation for years. But perhaps the biggest problem is that Jakarta is literally sinking.

Due to the enormous population pressure, vast amounts of groundwater are being pumped up. Many residents and businesses rely on underground water reserves because clean tap water is not readily available everywhere. As a result, the ground is sinking further and further. Some parts of Jakarta are sinking by tens of centimetres each year, and large parts of North Jakarta are now at or even below sea level; in just a few decades, Jakarta has already sunk 2.5 meters.

On top of that, the city lies directly on the Java Sea, making flooding an increasingly frequent occurrence. During heavy rainfall or high tides, entire neighbourhoods can be submerged. Climate change and rising sea levels are only making this problem worse.

For the Indonesian government, one thing therefore became increasingly clear: Jakarta remains important as a global economic hub, but as a long-term administrative capital, the city is becoming increasingly problematic. This led to the plan for a completely new capital: Nusantara.



Sea level of Jakarta. Source: lcomline.ning.com



The failing project of Nusantara

In 2019, the Indonesian government announced that it would seriously pursue plans for a new capital: Nusantara. The plan was officially presented by Bambang Brodjonegoro, then Minister of National Development Planning, under the leadership of President Joko Widodo.

According to Brodjonegoro, the extreme traffic congestion and Jakarta's gradual subsidence were the main reasons for building a completely new capital. Jakarta remained hugely important economically, but as an administrative center, the city was becoming increasingly unsuitable.

The name "Nusantara" comes from Old Javanese and roughly means "archipelago" or "island kingdom," though it is sometimes loosely translated as "jungle archipelago" due to its location in the heart of Kalimantan's natural landscape (the Indonesian part of Borneo). The new capital was ultimately intended to accommodate approximately two million residents and become a modern, sustainable, and smart city.

President Widodo announced in 2020 that construction was set to get underway around 2024. However, the global COVID-19 pandemic almost immediately caused significant delays. Funds that were originally intended for the construction of Nusantara had to be partially redirected toward healthcare and economic recovery, causing the project to be temporarily put on the back burner.



Location Nusantara on the map of Indonesia. Source: Britannica.com

But aside from the pandemic, there were many other reasons why Nusantara has not yet become a success story. The main reason is



actually quite simple: the city is far from finished. The Indonesian government does not plan to fully designate Nusantara as the new capital until around 2045. As long as infrastructure, housing, shops, schools, and workplaces are not yet fully developed, few people will voluntarily move to a city that still consists largely of construction sites.

In addition, the enormous costs play a major role. The construction of Nusantara is estimated to cost tens of billions of dollars. For a country like Indonesia, that is a massive investment. The government had hoped to raise significant funds from foreign investments and companies, but that has been a struggle. As a result, various construction projects are facing delays.

The city's location is also causing problems. Nusantara is being built in Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo. While islands such as Java, Sumatra, and Bali are known for their large populations and economic activity, Kalimantan is much more sparsely populated and is primarily famous for its vast rainforests and nature reserves.

Building a city with a population of millions requires altering or clearing large swaths of natural habitat. This has drawn heavy criticism from environmental organizations and Indonesian activists. Borneo is, in fact, one of the world's most important natural habitats, home to protected species such as orangutans and rare proboscis monkeys. It is also home to various indigenous communities who fear that their living space is steadily shrinking.

Furthermore, Borneo remains a geopolitically sensitive island. The island is divided among three countries:

- Indonesia
- Malaysia
- Brunei

Although major conflicts are rare, tensions do exist regarding borders, nature conservation, and economic interests. Moreover, many Indonesians feel a stronger cultural and economic connection to Java than to the remote Kalimantan. As a result, many residents are not exactly enthusiastic about moving thousands of kilometres away to live in a completely new city.





Nusantara in construction. Source:

Nieuwsblad.be

Future of Nusantara

The future of Nusantara remains highly uncertain for the time being. On August 17, 2024—Indonesian Independence Day—then-President Joko Widodo held a grand celebration in Nusantara. That moment was meant to symbolize that the new capital was slowly becoming a reality. The Indonesian government wanted to show that Nusantara would become the future political heart of the country.

Yet, for now, little seems to have come of that ambitious dream. In 2025, an estimated 10,000 people lived in the city. The majority of them were:

- government officials
- construction workers
- staff directly involved in the project

So virtually no one lives there by choice. Most residents “have to” be there because of their work. Aside from this group, it’s mainly curious tourists who occasionally come to see the massive construction projects in the middle of Kalimantan’s jungle.

As a result, the original goal of attracting more than one million residents to Nusantara by 2030 now seems highly unrealistic. Much of the infrastructure is lacking, and for the time being, large parts of the city consist mainly of:

- construction sites



- half-finished government buildings
- wide, empty roads with little traffic or activity

On top of that, the political situation has also changed. Joko Widodo was the main driving force behind Nusantara, but Prabowo Subianto is now the president of Indonesia. Under his administration, the construction of Nusantara appears to be receiving lower priority than it did under Widodo. The focus is currently more on economic stability, defence, and domestic politics than on accelerating the completion of an entirely new capital.

This has created a striking situation: Nusantara is already in danger of resembling a ghost town, even before the city has become fully operational. Grand plans, futuristic designs, and billions in investments are, for now, at odds with the reality of an empty city in the middle of the rainforest.

Conclusion

Although there are still nearly twenty years to go before Nusantara is officially scheduled to be fully operational, the city's future appears quite uncertain for the time being. The project was hugely ambitious from the start, but under President Prabowo Subianto, Nusantara does not seem to be receiving the same priority as it did under former President Joko Widodo. As a result, doubts are growing as to whether the city will ever truly become the political centre of Indonesia as originally planned.

Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that Jakarta is grappling with enormous problems. The city is rapidly sinking toward the Java Sea, is severely overpopulated, suffers from traffic chaos, and faces ever-



increasing flood risks. Indonesia will therefore have to find a solution for the future of its administrative centre one way or another.

But for now, Nusantara does not seem to be that solution. The city that was supposed to become a futuristic and sustainable capital currently looks more like a gigantic experiment whose success remains to be seen.

And so it is that, for now, Indonesia appears to be the only country in the world where the construction of a completely new capital did not immediately lead to a thriving new metropolis, but rather to a half-empty city in the middle of the rainforest.

But maybe we're completely off the mark, and Nusantara will become Indonesia's new capital in 2045—who knows?

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