

Contested Coastlines: The Political Economy of Coastal Exclusion and Special Economic Zone Development in Bali

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the political economy of coastal governance in Bali, focusing on the tension between national Special Economic Zone (SEZ) policies and local community rights. Following the establishment of the Sanur and Kura-Kura SEZs, Bali's southern coast has undergone rapid state-led transformation. Drawing on the frameworks of environmental politics and the coastal commons, this qualitative case study investigates how centralized development strategies affect local participation and spatial access. Primary data were collected between May and November 2024 through desk research and semi-structured interviews (N=10) with government officials, private-sector developers, and civil society organizations. The findings reveal that local participation is not merely suboptimal but structurally marginalized. In the Kura-Kura SEZ, governance takes the form of spatial enclosure, with corporate identity card systems restricting traditional fishermen's access to the coastal commons. In Sanur, the rapid displacement of coastal traders demonstrates institutional co-optation, using local village elites as intermediaries to enforce compliance and neutralize resistance. Ultimately, this article contributes to environmental political science by conceptualizing SEZs as exclusionary political arenas rather than purely administrative spaces. To prevent further marginalization, the study recommends legally embedding traditional (*Adat*) representation on SEZ supervisory boards and decentralizing environmental oversight to ensure inclusive and sustainable coastal governance.

Keywords: Coastal Governance, Special Economic Zones, Political Economy, Local Exclusion, Coastal Commons, Bali

INTRODUCTION

The governance of Indonesia's coastal zones has become a primary site of contestation between national economic ambitions and local community rights. This tension has intensified following the central government's aggressive expansion of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) into coastal regions. In Bali, the recent establishment of the Sanur SEZ (via Government Regulation No. 41/2022) and the Kura-Kura Island SEZ (via Government Regulation No. 23/2023) has transformed the island's southern coast into a focal point for national strategic projects. While state narratives frame these SEZs as necessary interventions for tourism diversification and post-pandemic economic recovery, this top-down development model raises profound political questions about environmental sustainability, spatial control, and the structural exclusion of local communities from coastal governance.

Historically, global scholarship on SEZs has been dominated by macroeconomic and regulatory perspectives. Extensive comparative studies have assessed SEZs by their capacity to attract foreign investment, enhance export competitiveness, and transfer policy models across the Global South (Aggarwal, 2022; Farole & Moberg, 2014; Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2013). However, a growing body of critical political economy literature challenges this state-centric economic view. Scholars have shown that SEZs often function as spatial enclaves that normalize labor vulnerability, facilitate state-backed land grabs, and marginalize informal economies (Bach, 2011; Campbell, 2018; Cross, 2010; Levien, 2012). In the Indonesian context, critical studies have highlighted how SEZ development in areas such as Mandalika and Batam frequently results in chaotic governance, land conflicts, and the bypassing of local socio-economic contexts (Adam, 2019; Aritenang, 2017; Hidayat & Negara, 2020; Pratama et al., 2023).

Despite this critical turn, a significant empirical and theoretical gap remains: previous research has rarely examined SEZ development through the lens of environmental politics and coastal commons governance. Coastal zones

are not merely vacant administrative spaces awaiting capital investment; they are complex socio-ecological systems, coastal commons, that provide essential environmental goods and sustain traditional livelihoods (Armitage et al., 2017; Bennet, 2019). In Southeast Asia, the commodification of coastal spaces has consistently led to environmental degradation and the loss of access for local fishing communities (Fabinyi et al., 2022). In Indonesia, sustainable coastal governance relies heavily on polycentric, community-based management and local customary (*Adat*) structures to protect shared resources such as mangroves and coral reefs (Frei & Berkes, 2017; Glaser, 2022; Sirimorok & Asfriyanto, 2020).

The introduction of centralized SEZ policies directly threatens these localized governance structures. The enactment of the Job Creation Law (Law No. 6/2023) fundamentally altered the paradigm established by previous coastal management laws (such as Law No. 27/2007). By centralizing spatial planning, licensing, and environmental impact assessments in Jakarta to accelerate investment, the state has systematically diminished the authority of both regional governments and local communities. Consequently, the core political issue in Bali's newly established SEZs is not merely a matter of economic policy implementation, but rather the active political exclusion of local actors from the governance of their own coastal environments.

Therefore, this study aims to describe and explain the political dynamics of local community participation, or the lack thereof, in the development of SEZs in Bali. By examining the Sanur and Kura-Kura SEZs, this research asks: *How do centralized SEZ policies alter coastal governance authority, and in what ways do these changes institutionalize the exclusion of local communities from the coastal commons?*

This article makes three distinct contributions to the study of coastal governance. Empirically, it provides primary qualitative data from the Sanur and Kura-Kura SEZs in Bali, capturing the ground-level friction between national development agendas and local communities. Conceptually, it

advances the political economy of environmental governance by showing how SEZ frameworks function as mechanisms of coastal enclosure and institutional co-optation, transforming shared coastal commons into exclusive corporate zones and using local elite structures to enforce spatial displacement. Practically, it offers policy recommendations to dismantle the exclusionary nature of centralized SEZ development, advocating for legally binding, inclusive governance structures that prioritize *Adat* customary rights and environmental sustainability over unchecked capital expansion.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study approach to examine power dynamics and institutional contestation in coastal governance following the establishment of the Sanur and Kura-Kura Bali Special Economic Zones (SEZs). A case study design is particularly well suited to this inquiry, as it enables an in-depth, contextualised analysis of how centralised national economic policies manifest as structural exclusion and governance friction at the local level (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data collection was carried out over a six-month fieldwork period from May to November 2024, using two primary methods: desk study and semi-structured interviews. The desk study involved a comprehensive review of policy documents, statutory regulations, spatial planning maps, and local media archives to map shifts in coastal authority.

To capture the full spectrum of the political economy of coastal governance, participants were selected through purposive sampling, targeting three key stakeholder pillars: government representatives, private-sector operators, and civil society organizations (CSOs). A total of 10 key informants were interviewed to achieve data saturation on the institutional mechanisms of the two SEZs.

Table 1. Informants Category, Role, and Primary Analytical Focus

Stakeholder Category	Informant Affiliation / Role	Primary Analytical Focus
Government Representatives (n=2)	SEZ Administrators	Centralization of licensing, regulatory synchronization, state development narratives.
Private Sector (n=5)	SEZ Corporate Managers, Project Developers	Capital accumulation strategies, spatial zoning, infrastructural security protocols.
Civil Society & Community (n=3)	Traditional (<i>Adat</i>) Leaders, Local Fishermen Alliances, CSOs	Coastal commons access, livelihood displacement, local participation vs. structural exclusion.

The empirical data collected from semi-structured interviews and field notes were analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis. Given the high political sensitivity surrounding land rights, community protests, and corporate-state alignments in Serangan and Sanur, strict ethical protocols were enforced. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with informed consent forms outlining the scope of the study. To protect local community members and informants from potential institutional or socio-economic repercussions, complete anonymity has been maintained throughout the manuscript. Informants are referenced solely by their generalized institutional roles, and all primary field data has been secured using encrypted data protection protocols.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Centralization Of Coastal Authority: Regulatory Shifts And The Erosion Of Local Governance

To understand the political friction in Bali's newly established Special Economic Zones (SEZs), it is first necessary to analyze the structural shift in Indonesia's coastal governance regime. Historically, post-authoritarian coastal management in Indonesia, anchored by Law No. 27 of 2007 on Coastal Zone and Small Islands Management, provided a legal basis for decentralized governance. The law formally recognized the necessity of community

participation and provided institutional space for local stakeholders and indigenous (*Adat*) communities to influence spatial planning and resource utilization. However, the national drive to accelerate foreign investment through SEZs has precipitated a systemic reversal of this decentralized paradigm.

The turning point in this spatial recentralization was the enactment of the Job Creation Law (Law No. 6 of 2023). Designed to dismantle bureaucratic hurdles and hyper-accelerate national strategic projects, the Job Creation Law fundamentally restructured coastal governance authority. In the context of SEZs, the law streamlined spatial planning, environmental impact assessments (EIAs), and licensing mechanisms by concentrating decision-making power at the central government level. Consequently, local governments and communities no longer hold primary authority over their immediate coastal environments. Crucial institutional processes, such as the issuance of location permits and the designation of conservation zones, which previously required local consultation and municipal recommendations, can now be bypassed or dictated by central investment agendas.

Table 2. Comparison of Regulations and Impact of Special Economic Zone in Bali

Governance Attribute	Decentralized Framework (Law No. 27 of 2007 / Law No. 1 of 2014)	Centralized SEZ Framework (Job Creation Law / Law No. 6 of 2023)	Direct Empirical Impact on Bali Cases
Licensing & Spatial Authority	Distributed across regional regents, mayors, and localized management plans.	Centralized within national ministries and designated SEZ Administrator boards.	Local governments and <i>Desa Adat</i> structures are excluded from primary zoning decisions in Sanur and Serangan.
Public Consultation & Participation	Explicitly legalizes and protects the management space of local and indigenous communities.	Permits are fast-tracked centrally, reducing localized environmental veto opportunities.	Community consultation is rendered performative, causing fragmented local resistance and restricted spatial access.
Environmental Oversight	Locally monitored and managed through regional environmental impact	Environmental impact analysis is consolidated and simplified at the	Structural dependence on central state agencies leaves local ecosystems vulnerable to rapid

assessments.

ministerial level.

infrastructure
degradation.

Source: Compiled by Authors

From an environmental politics perspective, this regulatory shift functions as a legal mechanism of disenfranchisement. By relaxing the stringency of local environmental oversight and public consultation requirements, the state prioritizes short-term capital accumulation over the socio-ecological resilience of coastal commons. In Bali, where coastal spaces are deeply intertwined with *Adat* customary laws, local fisheries, and socio-religious practices, this top-down centralization creates profound structural imbalances. When the central government designates a coastal area as an SEZ, it effectively superimposes a national corporate governance structure on pre-existing local and traditional institutions.

This is the precise institutional context in which the Sanur SEZ (established by Government Regulation No. 41/2022) and the Kura-Kura Island SEZ in Serangan (established by Government Regulation No. 23/2023) were created. Rather than isolated economic projects, these two SEZs on Bali's southern coast are the empirical manifestation of this centralized legal regime. The following case studies demonstrate how this top-down transfer of authority translates into the material exclusion of local communities, the spatial enclosure of the coastal commons, and the co-optation of local governance structures to serve state-capital interests.

Sanur Special Economic Zone

The Sanur Special Economic Zone (SEZ) reflects the Indonesian government's strategic ambition to integrate the health and tourism sectors to enhance global economic competitiveness. Spanning 41.26 hectares and backed by an initial investment of Rp10.3 trillion, the SEZ offers significant opportunities to create jobs, drive regional economic growth, and strengthen Bali's position as a premier global tourist destination. However, the development of this zone poses a number of significant challenges, ranging

from spatial management and environmental impact to social justice.

As the first region in Indonesia to focus on health tourism, the Sanur Special Economic Zone (SEZ Sanur) aims to offer world-class healthcare services integrated with premium tourism facilities. The Bali International Hospital (BIH), the SEZ's main component, is projected to become a leading model that combines advanced technology with comprehensive healthcare services.

However, this development also poses significant challenges, particularly in spatial management. Sanur, known for its natural beauty and strong local community, now faces pressure to meet the demands of large-scale investment. The importance of regulatory efforts that involve citizens in support of local economic growth should be recognized. In practice, these efforts must take local considerations into account without marginalizing citizens' interests, whether economic, social, or cultural (Hoffer et al., 2024). Relocations carried out without comprehensive consultation not only violate the principle of inclusivity but also risk damaging the long-established social and cultural networks of the local community.

The village authorities leased the shop houses in the SME centre to PT. HISI, the SEZ management, in this case. There was some tension when the traders were about to move. The problems arose between the village government and the community, not between PT. HISI and the community. The village government tried to convince the merchants that the relocation was for beach development and that, if they did not move, the government could not guarantee they could continue selling on the beach. On the other hand, the merchants were concerned about income and profits given the high rental costs and the shop's unfamiliar location. Eventually, however, some merchants began to move, particularly those who already had an established brand in the community. This also became a marketing strategy for the SME centre, which sought merchants with a reputation in the community for promotional purposes.

The SME centre, for example, must genuinely function as a platform for empowering the local community, not merely as a cosmetic addition to the development narrative. The collaboration between PT Hotel Indonesia Natour (PT HIN) and the Sanur Traditional Village Business Entity (BUPDA and BUMDES) has the potential to create synergy between the SEZ's managers and the local community.

The competing interests between developers and local communities reflect imbalances in the decision-making process. Top-down development policies often ignore the voices of those directly affected. In this context, a more participatory approach is needed to ensure that the needs and aspirations of local communities are integral to the Sanur SEZ planning. The government, together with the managing business entity, must commit to involving local communities at every stage of development, from planning to management.

This area also presents interesting dynamics within the local and national political economy. The dominance of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) in managing the Sanur SEZ demonstrates the state's significant role in facilitating investment and infrastructure development. However, this dominance also raises questions about the extent to which the private sector and local communities can participate in strategic decision-making. Partnerships between the public and private sectors need to be designed to ensure a fair and equitable distribution of benefits.

Within a broader framework, the Sanur SEZ also reflects Indonesia's efforts to leverage its geographical and demographic advantages in the global tourism market. As a health tourism destination, the SEZ offers opportunities to attract tourists from developed countries seeking high-quality medical services at more affordable costs. However, this competitiveness requires sustained investment in technology, infrastructure, and human resources, as well as targeted promotion to build a global reputation.

While the Sanur SEZ is rhetorically framed as integrating local Small

and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), empirical findings reveal a highly coercive spatial reorganization of the coastal economy. The relocation of local coastal traders to the newly designated SME centre illustrates the stark power asymmetries in the SEZ's implementation. A critical point of friction was the intentionally short period allotted for relocation. By imposing an accelerated timeline, the development consortium effectively eliminated space for meaningful public deliberation or organized resistance, reducing community participation to a mere administrative compliance exercise rather than genuine democratic engagement.

Furthermore, the enforcement mechanism reveals a sophisticated strategy of institutional co-optation. Rather than engaging directly with the affected traders, SEZ management used local village representatives as intermediary enforcers. By outsourcing the displacement process to the village government, SEZ developers successfully deflected vertical political friction (between the community and the state/corporate actors) and transformed it into horizontal conflict (between the traders and their own local leaders). Village authorities employed coercive narratives—warning traders that their right to operate on the beach could no longer be guaranteed if they refused relocation—to enforce compliance. Consequently, local customary structures were co-opted to serve as the administrative arm of national capital expansion. This demonstrates that the SEZ framework does not inherently empower local governance; rather, it exploits local hierarchies to secure corporate spatial control and neutralize grassroots opposition.

Kura-Kura Bali Special Economic Zone

The development of the Kura-Kura Bali Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on Serangan Island is one of the government's strategic initiatives to encourage investment and tourism growth in Bali. The zone is managed by Bali Turtle Island Development (BTID) under a master plan prepared by the government. The commons, or shared resources, include the sea, mangroves,

coral reefs, and the temple area, while private assets include commercial infrastructure such as shopping malls and international schools. This project holds great promise but also raises complex social, economic, and environmental dynamics that require serious attention.

The lack of local community involvement in the planning stage of the area's development is a major issue. The Serangan village and the Denpasar City Government were not directly involved in strategic decision-making, resulting in many policies being implemented without considering their impact on the local community.

Dialogue between BTID and residents is ineffective, creating a significant gap between the managers and the community. This form of dialogic engagement, undertaken through mechanisms such as public consultation or community socialisation, plays a pivotal role in facilitating effective communication among relevant stakeholders. BTID claims that it frequently engages in such practices. However, an interview with the former village head asserts that he has never met or engaged with BTID in any forum. When asked about this matter in one interview, the newly appointed village head stated that she is not personally aware of it.

The local fishermen, who are an important part of the community, are also fragmented. They lack an official organization that unites them and are divided into small groups. BTID regulates their access to the area by issuing around 400 identity cards, but this system is often seen as creating social exclusion. Public access to the area is heavily restricted, which adds to the tension between residents and managers. According to the head of SEZ administration, the restriction is intended to ensure public safety during infrastructure development in the area. Safety concerns were also the reason for the sea walls. BTID has a permit to manage the coastal area, granted by the central government. However, the administrator also noted that if the seawall were causing negative impacts, the permits could be revoked.

Additionally, local leadership dynamics complicate the situation.

Recent changes to village heads and traditional leaders have raised concerns. The new village head, who is not a native of Serangan, is perceived as lacking understanding of local community aspirations. Meanwhile, the change in traditional leaders has been marked by internal disputes. This situation further exacerbates social fragmentation in Serangan.

During our interview, our informant revealed that the management of the 498-hectare SEZ area oversees various development projects, including the Grand Outlet Mall, involving Japanese investors, and an international school with Singaporean investors. These projects have the potential to boost tourism and the local economy, but the area's exclusivity is a concern. Access for the local community is restricted through the main gate, with special permits required, and only those with BTID identity cards are allowed entry. Although BTID claims the area remains open for religious activities and community livelihoods, projects such as the beachfront mall and the international campus, which do not admit Indonesian students, indicate a trend towards greater exclusivity.

Public dissatisfaction with SEZ management has sparked conflicts. A 2023 demonstration by residents demanding rights to coastal areas was one example. During these demonstrations, security forces appeared to side with BTID, even nearly detaining some residents. Tensions escalated in 2024 when an agreement to hand over part of the area to the community was not implemented. The BTID manager who signed the agreement was subsequently demoted. Additionally, BTID frequently skips government-initiated dialogue forums, further straining its relationship with the community.

Another issue is the lack of transparency in resource allocation. Local residents were asked to submit their land certificates to the BTID office, which sparked suspicion and deepened polarisation within the community. Some support the SEZ for the economic opportunities it offers, while others oppose it, feeling excluded and fearing marginalization.

Environmental challenges are significant for the SEZ. The preservation

of a 30-hectare mangrove ecosystem managed by the Ministry of Environment/Environmental Control Agency (MoE/ECA) is a key programme, but these efforts need to be reviewed to assess their impact. The mangrove planting programme involving the local government and non-governmental organisations shows positive potential, but its implementation must be monitored to ensure it delivers tangible benefits for the community and the environment. Waste management is also a critical issue given the SEZ's proximity to the Suwung landfill. BTID claims to have collaborated with NGOs to learn from the management of the Banyumas landfill, but the primary responsibility remains with MoE.

Coordination between BTID and the government is carried out through the SEZ Supervisory Board and through the preparation of a master plan with the Ministry of Development Planning and the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy/Tourism and Creative Economy Agency. A total of 55 action points have been designed to ensure that the development of the area is in line with the needs of Serangan village. However, this coordination is often sectoral and does not always adopt a holistic approach involving all stakeholders.

The establishment of the Kura-Kura SEZ marks a profound shift in coastal governance, characterized by the spatial enclosure of the coastal commons. The most visible manifestation of this enclosure is the strict identity card system implemented by the zone's management, Bali Turtle Island Development (BTID). While the SEZ administration frames these access restrictions as a matter of public safety and infrastructural security, empirical data from civil society and local fishermen reveal a structural mechanism of exclusion. Access to the coastline, historically managed as an open-access common-pool resource under local customary (*Adat*) structures, is now heavily restricted. Local fishermen are prohibited from entering their traditional fishing grounds and docking areas without corporate-issued identification.

This bureaucratic requirement effectively transforms a public

ecological right into a conditional corporate privilege. By issuing approximately 400 identity cards to a fragmented group of fishermen, the management does not merely regulate access; it actively determines who is included or excluded from the coastal economy. This creates a deeply unequal power dynamic. The centralization of spatial control supersedes local *Adat* governance, alienating the community from their traditional livelihoods and socio-religious coastal spaces. Consequently, SEZ policy implementation in Serangan does not foster inclusive economic development but rather institutionalizes the marginalization of local coastal actors, replacing community-based resource access with hard territorial boundaries.

Table 3. Comparison Between Sanur SEZ & Kura-Kura Bali SEZ

Analytical Dimension	Sanur Special Economic Zone	Kura-Kura Bali Special Economic Zone
Primary Corporate Actor	PT Hotel Indonesia Natour / PT HISI	Bali Turtle Island Development (BTID)
Mechanisms of Spatial Control	Bureaucratic relocation of vendors to centralized SME shophouses.	Security gates, marine fencing, and a 400-corporate ID card system for fishermen.
Nature of Institutional Friction	Internalized between local village government and traditional merchants.	Direct confrontation between corporate developers, state security, and residents.
State Narrative vs. Field Reality	Bounded inclusion via forced commercial integration.	Total exclusion resulting in community mobilization and anti-enclosure protests.

Source: Compiled by Authors

CONCLUSION

This study examined the political economy of coastal governance in Bali, using the Sanur and Kura-Kura Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to investigate how centralized economic development strategies reshape local power dynamics and access to the coastal commons. The findings demonstrate that rather than fostering inclusive regional development, the national SEZ policy framework functions as an instrument of spatial and institutional enclosure, systematically marginalizing local coastal communities.

The empirical evidence reveals distinct yet complementary mechanisms of exclusion across the two cases. In the Kura-Kura SEZ,

governance took the form of hard spatial enclosure. By imposing a corporate-controlled identity card system, SEZ management transformed the coastal commons—historically governed by *Adat* structures as open-access spaces—into conditional corporate privileges. This structurally excluded local fishermen and eroded traditional socio-cultural access to the coastline. Conversely, the Sanur SEZ illustrates a strategy of institutional co-optation. The rapid, forced relocation of coastal traders utilized local village elites as intermediary enforcers, deflecting vertical opposition by generating horizontal conflict within the community. In both instances, local participation was reduced to coercive administrative compliance rather than genuine democratic deliberation.

Theoretically, this article contributes to the study of environmental politics and the political economy of development by challenging the narrative that SEZs are purely administrative or economic spaces. Instead, this research conceptualizes SEZs as highly contested political arenas in which state-backed capital expansion actively dismantles localized, communal coastal governance. The findings confirm that recent regulatory shifts, particularly the centralization of authority under the Job Creation Law, exacerbate structural inequalities by prioritizing capital accumulation over environmental sustainability and community rights.

To address these deep-rooted governance asymmetries, this study offers three targeted policy recommendations: 1). Institutionalize *Adat* Representation: To move beyond tokenistic participation, local *Adat* councils and traditional fishing alliances must be legally mandated members of SEZ Supervisory Boards, with binding voting rights on spatial zoning that affects the coastal commons; 2) Guarantee Access Rights and Transparency: The state must draft explicit regulatory guarantees that prohibit the privatization of public coastlines. Exclusionary mechanisms, such as corporate ID card systems that restrict traditional livelihoods, must be dismantled in favour of transparent, open-access protocols; 3). Decentralize Environmental

Accountability: Environmental oversight must be decoupled from the centralized investment-acceleration agenda. Returning environmental impact assessment (EIA) authority to local and independent ecological agencies is essential to ensure that massive infrastructure developments do not irreversibly degrade Bali's coastal ecosystems. Sustainable coastal governance in Bali requires abandoning top-down exclusionary paradigms and legally embedding local communities as the primary stewards and beneficiaries of their coastal environments.

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