

Continuity of Agrarian Domination in Deli Serdang from Colonialism to Reform

Tappil Rambe¹; Panji Suroso²; Jude Chikadibia Onwunyirimadu³;
Hidayat⁴; Abd. Haris Nasution⁵; Lanang Riyadi⁶

^{1,4,5}Faculty of Social Sciences, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

³Otueke Federal University, Nigeria

^{2,6}Faculty of Arts and Language, Universitas Negeri Medan, Indonesia

¹Correspondence Email: tappilrambe@unimed.ac.id

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Abstract

Persistent agrarian inequality in Indonesia reveals a critical gap in explaining how colonial legal and economic logics survive political regime change. This study examines how legal and institutional mechanisms reproduced and adapted agrarian domination in Ramunia Plantation, Deli Serdang, from the colonial period through the Reform Era. Using a critical-historical qualitative design, the study analyzed colonial archives, agrarian regulations, and institutional records alongside in-depth interviews with 30 informants and 40 field observation sessions. Data were interpreted through historical source criticism, thematic analysis, and triangulation. The findings demonstrate that political transitions changed the formal actors and instruments of control but did not dismantle underlying agrarian relations. Colonial concessions were reconfigured through nationalization, State Control Rights, HGU-based management, state-military-corporate networks, administrative fragmentation, and infrastructure-driven land acquisition. These adaptations left historical occupation, customary claims, and actual land use unresolved while privileging actors with stronger administrative and political resources. The study advances the continuum-of-domination proposition to explain that agrarian domination persists not through institutional immobility, but through the translation of inherited governing logics into new legal and administrative forms. Agrarian justice, therefore, requires conflict resolution that integrates documentary genealogy, historical land relations, actual land use, and differentiated community claims rather than relying exclusively on formal titles.

A. Introduction

Indonesia's political regimes have changed repeatedly, yet the structure of land domination in Deli Serdang has proved remarkably durable. Colonial plantation concessions, post-independence nationalization, military-backed land management, and infrastructure-led land acquisition changed the legal instruments and controlling actors without resolving communities' historical claims (Ikhsan, 2019; Lee, 2022). This persistent pattern shows that political transformation without substantive agrarian decolonization can reproduce rather than dismantle unequal land relations. Consequently, land remains a contested arena in which state authority, corporate interests, and community rights continue to collide across different political periods (Dhiaulhaq & McCarthy, 2020).

Within the framework of Critical Agrarian Studies (CAS), inequalities in land ownership are analyzed through the lenses of political economy, ecology, and distributive justice (Borras, 2023; Edelman & Wolford, 2017). The state's dependence on private capital often positions the corporate sector as the dominant actor, allowing agrarian policies to be exploited to facilitate capital accumulation while marginalizing the rights of smallholder farmers and indigenous communities (Batubara & Rachman, 2022; Dhiaulhaq & McCarthy, 2020). Although *Undang-undang Republik Indonesia No. 5 Tahun 1960 tentang Peraturan Dasar Pokok-Pokok Agraria* (Basic Agrarian Law) introduced a normative vision of equitable land redistribution in Indonesia, its implementation remains hampered by legal pluralism, overlapping regulations, and bureaucratic fragmentation, which ultimately fuel protracted agrarian conflicts (Krisnantoro, 2024; Kurnia et al., 2022; Nurdin & Tegnan, 2019).

Although previous studies have captured various dimensions of these agrarian conflicts, significant conceptual gaps remain. The existing literature has largely focused on post-New Order agrarian policies (Sukaryanto, 2017), shifts in plantation labor regimes (Li, 2017), the neoliberalization of agriculture (Wardana, 2020), or the broad process of plantation nationalization (Ikhsan, 2019). However, these studies have not sufficiently explained the mechanisms through which colonial legal and economic logics continue to be reproduced by various actors following regime change. Existing findings on nationalization, institutional fragmentation, and customary rights conflicts have not addressed why the dominant colonial agrarian structure remains deeply entrenched despite the country's democratization and reform processes.

The novelty of this article lies in its identification of the legal and institutional adaptation mechanisms that perpetuate this power. This study argues that the concept of

the “continuum of domination” corrects the linear assumption that regime change or nationalization automatically results in structural decolonization. Instead, what often emerges is a form of internal colonialism: land expropriation legitimized by formal law, in which agrarian exploitation continues through the collaboration of new elite powers.

To unravel the complexity of these power mechanisms, this article integrates social history and political economy using the theory of the social bandit (Hobsbawm, 1972). Operationally, this conceptual integration is used to interpret how legal categories are manipulated by elites (state and corporate actors) as a form of exploitative domination. At the same time, it explains how the resistance of indigenous communities and farmers is often criminalized, even though such resistance is fundamentally rooted in demands for moral justice and survival. Through this interdisciplinary lens, the dynamics of agrarian spatial contestation can be analyzed beyond mere legal disputes.

The Ramunia Plantation area in Deli Serdang embodies the historical intersection of the legacy of colonial land expropriation, militaristic nationalization policies, and land commercialization during the Reform Era (Dhiaulhaq & McCarthy, 2020; Lee, 2022). Beyond its local significance, this case offers a comparative contribution to the global agrarian debate in the Global South regarding the persistence of colonial law, state-led land expropriation, and the limitations of market-oriented agrarian reform policies (Otten et al., 2020).

This article poses one main research question: How have legal and institutional mechanisms reproduced and adapted agrarian domination across various political regimes in the Ramunia Plantation area, Deli Serdang, from the colonial era to the Reform Era? By adopting a critical-historical focus, this study aims to trace and unpack the mechanisms of continuity and adaptation in land control. Through this analysis, the findings provide an analytical basis for understanding institutional obstacles to agrarian reform and may inform future comparative research and policy discussions.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative historical-critical design (Law, 2021) to examine agrarian domination in Deli Serdang Regency. Ramunia Plantation Village was treated as a critical historical case to trace how mechanisms of agrarian domination adapted across political regimes from the colonial to the Reform era (Fitrisia et al., 2021; van Langenberg, 1977). Data collection, conducted between March and November 2025, combined archival research, in-depth interviews, and non-participant field observation (Kipping et al., 2013).

To reconstruct chronological shifts in land policies, we examined colonial and state archives over three months, primarily the AVROS Archival Inventory (1892–1985) at the National Archives of the Republic of Indonesia (ANRI) in Jakarta. The search targeted concession maps, agrarian decrees, military correspondence, and corporate reports relevant to Ramunia's spatial boundaries and legal status. To mitigate institutional biases, archival claims were triangulated with secondary literature, NGO reports, media coverage, and oral histories.

Fieldwork involved 40 observation sessions across Ramunia to document the spatial configuration of contested lands, physical boundaries, daily agricultural practices, and community interactions in public spaces, all of which were compiled into detailed field notes. Concurrently, semi-structured, 60-to-90-minute interviews were conducted with 30 key informants selected via purposive and snowball sampling based on their direct experience with local land disputes. To ensure comprehensive representation, the sample comprised 12 farmers (tenants and non-tenants), 5 former plantation workers, 5 community leaders (including youth and student representatives), 4 government and military officials, and 4 NGO advocates. Interviews explored historical land use, eviction experiences, legal knowledge, and state-corporate interactions. All sessions were audio-recorded with explicit consent and transcribed verbatim, with interviewing continuing until theoretical saturation was reached.

Data analysis followed the thematic coding procedures outlined by Miles et al. (2018). The research team coded transcripts, field notes, and archival summaries using theoretical categories concerning resistance, state-corporate alliances, and legal adaptations. Contradictory evidence was retained and integrated into the analytical matrix to represent the fragmented nature of institutional claims. Following Flick (2018), data-source triangulation was conducted by cross-checking statements across informant groups and comparing oral testimonies with documentary evidence.

Formal certification from an Institutional Review Board was not required for social science field research at the authors affiliated institution when the data were collected. Nevertheless, given the sensitivity of agrarian conflicts involving state and military actors, all informants provided informed consent and retained the right to withdraw without penalty. Their identities were protected through an alphanumeric pseudonym system to minimize potential legal and security risks. All audio recordings and digital transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected devices accessible only to the research team.

During the plantation's operation, land that had previously been under community control was incorporated into the concession regime. One such arrangement involved "privileged rights" or "*jaluran land*" (Mudhoffir, 2022). The local population, known as *Rakyat Penunggu* (indigenous inhabitants), was permitted to use this land to grow food crops during the intervals between tobacco planting cycles (Ikhsan & Saidin, 2023). In practice, the permitted crops were primarily rice and corn, after which the land was returned to the company for the next plantation cycle. The expansion of the plantations required a massive workforce, establishing the Kuala Namu District a major tobacco-producing region. By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, local settlements in Ramunia became increasingly established alongside corporate plantation development.

In local oral tradition, the name Ramunia is associated with a native plant that was once abundant. The name derives from a tree species that historically dominated the vegetation, leading the area to be known as Ramunia and eventually Ramunia Plantation Village (Interview with AK, resident, informant I-01, June 2025). The archival and oral evidence from this period records a shift in land status and function from a community-controlled space under local arrangements to a plantation zone governed by concession-based regulations.

b. The Japanese Occupation: Changes in Land Use and the Expansion of Peasant Farming

The Japanese Occupation, which began in 1942, altered the use of plantation land. The plantation industry was halted or redirected, and land was reallocated to meet wartime economic needs. Plantation land was utilized for food production and military-related commodities, with the Japanese government mandating broader agricultural cultivation (Daigaku & Kenkyūjo, 1973). In Ramunia, larger portions of plantation land were cultivated by communities for subsistence crops. These farmers included local indigenous residents, migrants from other regions, and former plantation laborers.

This shift altered the community's relationship with the land. While the colonial era maintained relatively strict boundaries between plantation land and community spaces, the Japanese period afforded plantation laborers and other residents' greater opportunities to occupy and cultivate these lands. As a result, the previous *jaluran land* system ceased to function as it had before. The available records show that land use shifted from commercial plantation production toward wartime food production, while communities gained greater direct access to portions of plantation land.

c. Early Independence and the Old Order: Former Concession Lands and Administrative Restructuring

After independence, NV Senembah Maatschappij withdrew from the Ramunia region. These former concession lands lacked clear ownership regulations in the early years of independence. This ambiguity allowed various groups, particularly former contract laborers who regarded their work experience as a basis for land claims, to occupy and cultivate the area.

Community control over the land evolved alongside post-independence socio-political shifts. The 1948 Social Revolution in Deli Serdang weakened the position of the Serdang Sultanate, increasing uncertainty regarding land claims (Reid, 2014). Consequently, more migrants entered Ramunia. In 1954, the government issued Plantation Land User Registration Cards through the Assistant District Head, based on *Undang-Undang Darurat Republik Indonesia No. 8. Tahun 1954 Tentang Penyelesaian Soal Pemakaian Tanah Perkebunan oleh Rakyat* (The Settlement of the Use of Plantation Land by the People). Although these cards served as administrative records of the community's presence, they did not fully resolve the issue of land ownership. AVROS archives (November 26, 1955) regarding prosecutions of illegal land cultivators illustrate the government's struggle with widespread land occupation by the community.

During the Sukarno era, mass farmers' organizations mobilized demands for land. The Indonesian Farm Workers' Union strengthened the community's claims to former plantation lands. However, administrative status was not fully transferred to the farmers. *Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia No. 4 Tahun 1959 tentang Penentuan Perusahaan Pertanian/ Perkebunan Tembakau Milik Belanda* (Determination of Dutch-Owned Tobacco Agricultural/ Plantation Companies) retained Ramunia as part of the NV Senembah Maatschappij concession in the Kuala Namu District. The 1958 nationalization of plantations subsequently served as the basis for the takeover of Dutch-owned companies, transforming the Deli Serdang Senembah Maatschappij into the state-owned PPN Baru Tandjong Morawa (*Undang-undang Republik Indonesia No. 86 Tahun 1958 Tentang Nasionalisasi Perusahaan-Perusahaan Milik Belanda* [Nationalization of Dutch-Owned Companies]).

Formal commercial claims over the nationalized land also emerged during the Old Order. PT Karya Bumi was recorded as having obtained a Hak Guna Usaha (Right to Cultivate/HGU) for the Ramunia land through the Decree of the Minister of

Agriculture and Agrarian Affairs No. SK. II/26/Ka/63, dated September 30, 1963. The HGU covered approximately 768 hectares for a duration of 25 years. Because the 1963 HGU was never properly registered, the land remained officially classified as land under direct state control, while communities continued to use and claim portions of it.

d. The New Order: Shifts in Management, HGU, and Land Ownership Conflicts

During the New Order, land management in Ramunia shifted toward military-backed institutional control. The new administration inherited the unresolved consequences of the 1963 PT Karya Bumi HGU and the continuing presence of communities on the contested land. Conflict over this arrangement was documented as early as 1968. According to a statement by the Village Head of Ramunia I in the Decision of the Deli Serdang Land Reform Oversight and Advisory Board dated June 12, 1968, plantation officials evicted residents who were living and farming on the coconut plantation land.

The consequences of earlier administrative decisions evolved further as the New Order consolidated its institutional reach. A major structural shift occurred when PT Gelorata was dissolved by Order of the Military Commander (Pangdam II/BB) No. Sprin/830/IX/1984, dated September 11, 1984, which officially transferred land management to the military cooperative Puskopadam II/BB. Subsequent administrative actions further altered the institutional claims over the land. On December 16, 1987, Puskopad A/BB submitted a new HGU application after obtaining primary approval from the Regent of Deli Serdang through Letter No. 503.525/4739, dated November 30, 1987, and a crop conversion permit from the Directorate General of Plantations through Letter No. HK.350/Ec.99, dated June 6, 1984.

Land documents from this era reveal significant discrepancies in land area. According to Puskopad A/BB, the initial area of 768 hectares (stemming from the 1963 claim) was revised via Site Map No. 17/04/V/1989 (September 22, 1989) to 638 hectares, acknowledging that 130 hectares were lands under community control. The Minutes of the North Sumatra B Committee No. 10/PPT/B/1992 (September 7, 1992) noted the presence of a 60-hectare military settlement and a 3-hectare cemetery, leaving 575 hectares. The most recent HGU Certificate No. 1 (January 25, 1996) lists an area of 569.32 hectares. These discrepancies are significant; information from the NGO Forum Masyarakat Tani Maju indicates a military settlement covering 400 hectares, which contradicts Puskopad's claim of 60 hectares.

The link between these evolving HGU statuses and land commercialization became evident during the land acquisition for the Kuala Namu Airport. Mandated by Minister of Transportation Decrees No. 41 of 1995 and No. 66 of 1996, PT Angkasa Pura II initiated an acquisition process targeting a total of 1,650 hectares. According to the company's official land acquisition records, Puskopad A/BB and military retirees received compensation in 1997 for relinquishing approximately 351 hectares of this land within the Ramunia Plantation area.

The documentary record identifies the institutional and financial transaction between the state corporation and military-linked actors, whereas an interview with an Angkasa Pura II employee describes the overlapping community claims encountered during the acquisition process. The employee stated:

Previously, relocating residents from the Ramunia Plantation was very difficult. They refused to be labeled as illegal occupants, as they felt they had occupied the land for a long time. Although the land belonged to the Military Command (Kodam) and Angkasa Pura had already provided compensation to Kodam, we could not ignore the residents. The process was exhausting, so in the end we also provided compensation to them. Only then were these obstacles overcome. (Interview with S, employee, informant I-14, July 2025)

Taken together, the records from 1963 to 1996 show successive changes in formal rights, land area calculations, institutional management, and compensation arrangements, while community claims remained unresolved.

e. The Reform Era: Rising Economic Value and Conflicting Claims

During the Reform Era, the economic value of land in Ramunia surged alongside the construction of Kuala Namu Airport. Following a site study in 1994, Kuala Namu was selected through Ministry of Transportation Decrees No. 41 of 1995 and No. 66 of 1996 (November 6, 1996). The acquisition of 1,650 hectares of land involved plots associated with PTPN II and residents from several villages, including Ramunia. In Ramunia, the process was complicated by an ongoing community-military conflict. Although Angkasa Pura II provided compensation to Puskopad, residents continued to claim the land and demanded restitution.

Field observations conducted in 2025 documented that Ramunia continued to function as an agricultural production area alongside airport-related infrastructure and land associated with HGU claims. Approximately 220 hectares had historically been used as rice paddies. The conflict escalated when an irrigation canal used by the

community was allegedly leveled by Puskopad. These overlapping land uses positioned Ramunia simultaneously as a source of community livelihoods, an area subject to HGU-related claims, and part of a strategic infrastructure zone.

An interview with a non-tenant farmer indicated that the rising value of the land also encouraged speculative acquisition: *"Some of the land in the Ramunia Plantation was purchased by outside parties and left undeveloped, in the hope that its value would increase in the future."* (Interview with R, a farmer who is not a tenant, informant I-12, May 2025)

The majority of residents are tenant farmers, alongside civil servants, merchants, and airport workers. An interviewed farmer associated the intensification of conflict with airport development and subsequent relocation plans: *"Conflicts intensified after the airport was built. Residents were asked to relocate due to plans to build a hospital. Rumors also circulated about a land transaction worth approximately Rp 4 trillion."* (Interview with M, farmer, Informant I-08, May 2025)

These accounts indicate that Reform-era conflict extended beyond land use to encompass administrative recognition, compensation eligibility, infrastructure development, and the increasing economic value of land.

The findings across the five historical periods demonstrate that agrarian transformation in Ramunia involved substantial changes in political authority, legal status, and land-use arrangements, but these changes did not consistently eliminate earlier patterns of inequality. To clarify the historical sequence and identify the elements that persisted across regime changes, Table 1 synthesizes the transformation of agrarian domination in Ramunia from the colonial period to the Reform era.

Table 1. Historical transformation of agrarian domination in Ramunia, Deli Serdang

Era	Political and Agrarian Context	Dominant Actors	Form of Land Control	Transformation of Domination
Dutch Colonial Era (1870–1942)	Agrarian Law and concessionary plantation system; <i>domein verklaring</i> structured state claims over land	Colonial government, local sultanates, plantation corporations	Long-term plantation concessions; customary/communitary access subordinated to concessionary rights	Communal/customary land was incorporated into colonial plantation capitalism
Japanese Occupation (1942–1945)	Plantation land reorganized for wartime production	Japanese military administration and local officials	Centralized agricultural control, compulsory production and labor	Colonial control shifted to militarized wartime extraction
Early	Postcolonial	Indonesian	Former plantation	Formal ownership

Era	Political and Agrarian Context	Dominant Actors	Form of Land Control	Transformation of Domination
Independence & Nationalization (1945–1960)	restructuring and nationalization of Dutch enterprises	state, plantation institutions, local elites	lands incorporated into state-controlled assets	changed, but community claims remained unresolved
Old Order & BAL (1960–1965)	Basic Agrarian Law introduced a social-justice orientation amid political conflict	State, plantation actors, peasant organizations	Agrarian reform remained incompletely implemented	Normative decolonization was not fully translated into redistribution
New Order (1966–1998)	Plantation management and HGU expanded within state-led development	State, military institutions, plantation corporations	HGU-based large-scale land control	Colonial concessionary logic adapted into state–corporate control
Reform Era (1998–Present)	Decentralization, infrastructure development, and rising land values	Government, military-linked actors, corporations, communities	Overlapping administrative claims, HGU-linked land, acquisition and compensation	Democratization altered actors and procedures but did not eliminate inherited domination

Source: Authors' synthesis based on archival documents, interviews, observation, and secondary literature

Table 1 shows that changes in political regimes altered the actors, legal instruments, administrative arrangements, and functions of land in Ramunia. The colonial plantation regime established concession-based control; the Japanese occupation redirected land toward wartime production; nationalization transferred formal authority to state institutions; the New Order reorganized control through HGU and military-linked management; and the Reform Era introduced infrastructure development and compensation-based claims. Across these changes, historical community claims remained unresolved and continued to shape subsequent land conflicts.

2. Discussion

The central meaning of the findings is that political regime change did not eliminate agrarian domination in Ramunia; it altered the actors, legal instruments, and institutional arrangements through which control was exercised. Continuity did not depend on the survival of a single colonial institution. Instead, it was reproduced through the capacity of successive regimes to adapt inherited mechanisms of control—from plantation concessions and nationalization to HGU-based management, military-linked administration, and infrastructure-led land acquisition. This explains why formal political transformation did not produce substantive agrarian decolonization (Hasbi, 2025; Rahman, 2024).

The primary mechanism underlying this continuity was the modification of legal categories without resolving communities' historical relationships with the land. The colonial principle of *domein verklaring* placed unclaimed land within the state's domain (Kaneko, 2021; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2001; Wily, 2018), enabling plantation companies to obtain long-term rights through *erfpacht*. Although the 1960 Basic Agrarian Law abolished this framework and introduced State Control Rights with a different normative orientation, HGU continued to grant large-scale control over land (Wiryani et al., 2024). Legal reform, therefore, changed the language of authority without necessarily changing its distributive consequences (Arifin et al., 2025; Jayuska et al., 2025; Andiko et al., 2024). This finding extends studies showing how state ownership can subsequently be translated into new management rights, concessions, and investment arrangements (Anguelov, 2024; Pujiningsih et al., 2023; Sahab et al., 2025).

The 1958 nationalization transferred Dutch-owned plantations to the state but left competing community claims unresolved. Former plantation laborers grounded their claims in occupation and labor, whereas the Rakyat Penunggu relied on customary rights associated with *jaluran land* (Ikhsan, 2014). Nationalization consequently changed the formal holder of authority without resolving the historical, social, and economic foundations of land entitlement (Nordin et al., 2025; Sulfinadia et al., 2026; Pairin et al., 2024). This finding extends Meckelburg and Wardana (2024) by showing that postcolonial state ownership did not terminate dispossession; it transformed a colonial corporation-community dispute into a continuing struggle between communities and state institutions over recognition, management rights, and land status.

Post-nationalization control also demonstrates that the state did not operate as a homogeneous actor. PT Karya Bumi, PT Gelorata, Puskopad A/BB, state plantation institutions, and local authorities entered the land arena through different administrative arrangements. Agrarian domination was therefore reproduced through institutional networks rather than a single continuous organization. Colonial companies depended on concessions, the early republic relied on nationalization and ministerial decrees, and the New Order consolidated control through state-military-corporate relationships (Harahap et al., 2026; Gunawan et al., 2026; Santoso et al., 2026). The persistence of domination lay in the adaptability of these relationships.

Administrative fragmentation further strengthened this adaptability. Competing records identified different land areas, boundaries, rights holders, and military

settlement claims. Such fragmentation can create opportunities for negotiation, but it can also prolong conflict by allowing actors to invoke different documents and administrative channels without a binding resolution mechanism (Asgaf et al., 2026). In Ramunia, documentary inconsistency was not merely a technical deficiency. It shaped whose claims were administratively recognized, who became eligible for compensation, and which version of land history acquired legal authority (Napsiah et al., 2024; Ramli et al., 2024). Fragmentation therefore functioned simultaneously as a source of uncertainty and a mechanism through which control remained contestable.

Hobsbawm (1972) conceptualized social banditry as peasant resistance against an unjust political and economic order. The Ramunia findings, however, indicate that community action cannot be placed within a single category. Former plantation workers, Rakyat Penunggu communities, tenant farmers, migrants, and local elites relied on different historical experiences and economic relationships with the land. Distinguishing livelihood protection, customary claims, protest, and acquisitive occupation prevents agrarian resistance from being romanticized (Suhardiman et al., 2026). This differentiation also extends Critical Agrarian Studies by showing that unequal access is shaped not only by state–corporate relations but also by rural class, dependence on land, access to capital, and political networks (Ilhammullah, 2026) (Hidayati et al., 2024; Solihan et al., 2025; Damanuri & Futaqi, 2025).

The findings concerning civil-society involvement require similar caution. Advocacy organizations provided channels for articulating community claims, but their representation and effectiveness were not perceived uniformly by local actors. The author's position is that agrarian mobilization should neither be dismissed as opportunism nor idealized as inherently emancipatory. It must be examined as a political arena in which rights, representation, organizational interests, and access to resources are negotiated (Mukti & Jasin, 2025; Lohlker, 2024). This interpretation connects Ramunia to broader scholarship showing that legal and social mobilization can empower marginalized communities while remaining shaped by institutional strategies and power relations (Buckel et al., 2024; Matthews, 2023).

The Reform Era confirms that democratization does not automatically dismantle inherited agrarian structures. Kuala Namu Airport increased the economic significance of land and incorporated unresolved military and community claims into a new infrastructure-development process. Pre-existing administrative recognition influenced who could be treated as a rights holder and who became eligible for compensation (Putri

& Ehsonov, 2024; Swardhana & Jenvitchuwong, 2023; Irawan et al., 2024). Agrarian transformation therefore did not proceed linearly from colonialism to the nation-state and then to democracy (Safitri, 2026). The authors argue that domination persists because successive regimes adapt inherited land categories, administrative arrangements, and control over productive assets to new political and economic conditions. This process constitutes the continuum of domination.

The mechanisms underlying this continuum are summarized in Table 2. The table connects the empirical evidence from Ramunia with its institutional interpretation and broader agrarian implications.

Table 2. *Mechanisms of the Continuum of Agrarian Domination in Ramunia*

Mechanism	Empirical Evidence in Ramunia	Interpretation	Agrarian Implication
Adaptation of legal land categories	The colonial <i>domein verklaring</i> framework was replaced by the State's Right of Control, while HGU subsequently became an important instrument of large-scale land management.	Formal legal categories changed, but institutional mechanisms continued to structure who could exercise recognized control over land.	Legal reform did not automatically resolve historical community claims.
Nationalization without immediate redistribution	The 1958 nationalization transferred Dutch plantation ownership into state-controlled plantation structures, while community occupation and historical claims continued.	Nationalization changed the formal holder of authority without resolving the discrepancy between ownership, use, and historical claims.	Postcolonial state ownership could reproduce unresolved tenure conflicts.
Institutional reconfiguration	PT. Karya Bumi, PT. Gelorata, Puskopad A/BB, state plantation institutions, and local government became involved in successive phases of land management.	Agrarian control shifted through changing institutional networks rather than through a single continuous actor.	Domination became institutionally adaptable across political regimes.
Administrative fragmentation	Land records documented differences between 768 and 638 hectares, while subsequent records identified different areas for military settlement and HGU.	Competing documents and administrative claims created uncertainty over the boundaries and status of land.	Fragmentation prolonged tenure uncertainty while creating multiple arenas for negotiation and contestation.
State-military-corporate interaction	HGU arrangements, military-linked management, and compensation associated with infrastructure development brought multiple powerful actors into the same land arena.	Land control was reproduced through relationships among state institutions, military actors, corporations, and administrative authorities.	Agrarian inequality persisted through changing elite configurations.
Development-driven	Kuala Namu Airport development increased the	Development projects incorporated unresolved	Democratization and development

Mechanism	Empirical Evidence in Ramunia	Interpretation	Agrarian Implication
reevaluation of land	economic significance of land and intensified competing claims over use and compensation.	historical claims into new economic and administrative processes.	did not necessarily dismantle inherited land conflicts.

Source: Authors' synthesis based on archival documents, interviews, observation, and secondary literature

The theoretical contribution of the continuum-of-domination proposition is to distinguish institutional continuity from institutional immobility. Domination persisted not because colonial arrangements remained unchanged, but because their governing logic could be translated into postcolonial legal and administrative forms (Kusmayanti & Suwandono, 2024; Duhriah et al., 2024). This interpretation develops Ikhsan's (2019) analysis of plantation nationalization by explaining how unresolved territorial relations survived changes in ownership. It also extends Lee's (2022) work on institutional fragmentation by demonstrating that administrative plurality can simultaneously open negotiation spaces and reproduce uncertainty that benefits actors with greater legal, political, and documentary resources.

Practically, the findings indicate that agrarian conflict resolution cannot rely exclusively on verifying formal title or HGU status (Pradana et al., 2024). When administrative recognition, historical occupation, customary claims, and actual land use do not coincide, reliance on a single document may reproduce rather than resolve the conflict. Resolution processes must therefore examine the genealogy of land documents, asset transfers, inconsistencies in recorded boundaries, and differentiated community claims (Rusmiyati et al., 2026; Dirwan et al., 2023). Socially, such an approach is necessary to prevent communities with limited documentary resources from being treated merely as unlawful occupants of land with which they maintain historical and livelihood relationships.

The Ramunia case also has broader significance for agrarian debates across the Global South. Colonial archives and legal-administrative frameworks can be repurposed by modern states to legitimize contemporary dispossession (Sommer & de Vries, 2023; Suhardiman et al., 2026) (Ismail et al., 2026; Wahdini et al., 2025). Postcolonial nationalization may replace foreign ownership without producing equitable redistribution (Anguelov, 2024; Pujiningsih et al., 2023; Sahab et al., 2025), while infrastructure development can reactivate conflicts over customary or occupied land (Meckelburg & Wardana, 2024) (Hamdi et al., 2025; Haris et al., 2024). The continuum of domination therefore offers a meso-level proposition for comparing postcolonial settings characterized by plural legal

histories, unresolved asset transfers, and adaptable institutional arrangements, without treating Ramunia as universally representative (Wibowo et al., 2026; Puteh et al., 2024).

Several limitations define the boundaries of this analysis. Because the study focuses on a single plantation area, its findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable. The unequal availability of historical sources means that earlier periods are documented mainly through institutional records, a bias that triangulation reduces but cannot eliminate. Retrospective accounts of land areas and institutional actions were therefore treated as comparative claims rather than standalone facts. The study also provides limited differentiation by gender and generation, while its evidence primarily supports institutional and political analysis rather than ecological interpretation. Finally, restricted access to corporate and military actors required greater reliance on documents and secondary sources for particular phases. These limitations do not invalidate the continuum-of-domination proposition, but they restrict the contexts to which it can presently be applied.

D. Conclusion

Agrarian political transformation in Deli Serdang, particularly at the Ramunia Plantation, did not automatically eliminate inequalities in land ownership. Across the colonial period, Japanese occupation, early independence, New Order, and Reform Era, the actors and institutional forms of control changed, but the underlying capacity to concentrate authority over land persisted. This continuity was reproduced through the adaptation of legal categories, the reconfiguration of institutional networks, administrative fragmentation, and the development-driven revaluation of land. Consequently, transitions from colonial concessions to nationalization, HGU-based management, and infrastructure acquisition did not resolve the tension between historical claims, actual land use, customary entitlement, and administrative recognition.

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the continuum-of-domination proposition, which distinguishes institutional continuity from institutional immobility. Agrarian domination endured not because colonial institutions remained unchanged, but because their governing logic could be translated into new legal, administrative, and political arrangements. Practically, this finding indicates that agrarian conflict resolution cannot depend solely on formal titles or HGU status. It must examine the genealogy of land documents, asset transfers, boundary inconsistencies, historical occupation, customary

claims, and differences among community groups. An equitable resolution framework therefore requires transparent historical verification, coordinated institutional decision-making, and meaningful participation by communities whose claims are weakly represented in formal documentation.

The study's single-case design, uneven historical documentation, limited differentiation by gender and generation, and restricted access to corporate and military actors define the boundaries of its conclusions. Future research should compare Ramunia with other plantation regions in North Sumatra and the broader Global South to examine whether similar mechanisms operate across different legal and political contexts. It should also integrate gender, generational, and ecological perspectives while distinguishing the experiences of indigenous communities, former plantation workers, tenant farmers, and migrants. Ultimately, regime change alone cannot produce agrarian justice when the legal and institutional infrastructure sustaining land concentration remains intact and capable of adapting to new political and economic conditions.

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Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial or non-financial interests that could be considered to influence the work reported in this paper.

Declaration of Generative AI

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) solely to assist with language refinement, structural clarity, seek understanding of meaning and editorial consistency. Generative AI was not used to collect, generate, analyze, or interpret research data, nor to produce or fabricate empirical findings, citations, or

references. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, verified, and revised by the authors, who assume full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, integrity, and final content of the manuscript.

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