

**ON THE FINGERTIPS OF GOVERNMENT:
FOREST FIRES AND SHIFTING ALLEGIANCE OF STATE OFFICIALS
IN INDONESIA**

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This paper explicates the dynamics between lower rank state officials and indigenous people in order to address a broader question of why state interventions are still unable to stop forest fires from occurring in Indonesia. Since the devastating forest fires in 1997, the Indonesian government has developed initiatives to prevent and to resolve this environmental catastrophe. A general initiative to mitigate the problem is to regulate indigenous people's use of fire in slash and burn agriculture. Even with the state's oppressive intervention at the village level, however, forest fires continue to occur annually. This study was conducted in 2015 and 2016 in Mantangai, the former site of Indonesia's Mega Rice Project, Central Kalimantan. The research deploys an ethnographic approach comprising participant observation of people's actions in both farming and forest areas and interviews with more than 75 people including farmers, fishers, loggers, hunters, and local state officials at the sub-district and village levels. The findings show that the occurrence of forest fires is a result of the shifting allegiance of lower rank officials, from state to society. These lower rank officials show an attitude of disobedience by "allowing" people to set fires in the forest and farming areas. This paper argues that the shift is driven by problematic enforcement and disempowering bureaucracy on the one hand, and heavy socio-cultural pressure on the other, that the local state officials endure during fire events. These dynamics create a particular juncture that stirs their positionality and they, in turn, use their power to stand with the society to overcome the state's strategies.

Keywords: Forest fires, State intervention, Shifting Allegiance, Ethnography, Indonesia.