The Art of Being a Local in Medan, Indonesia

By Fani Rachmita, ITDP Indonesia

With more than 13,000 islands, even fellow Indonesians can feel like foreigners in the world’s largest archipelago nation. The islands vary widely in language and culture, which can complicate efforts by residents of one island to secure community buy-in on another island. Such was ITDP Indonesia’s challenge when it sought to introduce BRT to transport operators in Medan, the country’s third largest city with over three million people and home to the fiercely independent Batak ethnic group.

While the island of Java is home to Indonesia’s two largest population centers, Jakarta and Surabaya, Medan is the capital of North Sumatra, an island famous for its coffee and local culinary delights like durian pancakes, pork roast, and unique Chinese-Malay dishes. With captivating scenery, the national government has targeted North Sumatra as an international tourist destination. That priority has promoted new infrastructure projects, such as an airport and a 600-hectare area for resorts, five-star hotels, and restaurants around 440 square mile (1,140 square km) Lake Toba, the world’s largest volcanic lake. The growth spurt also opened an opportunity for a BRT system to replace a chaotic mini-bus system.

For the last few decades, Medan residents have mostly commuted via mini-buses, run by some 11 private transport operators. While there are a plethora of routes, the mini-buses lack comfort and safety. As a result, in recent years the number mini-bus passengers has decreased and Medan residents began switching to private vehicles, which has clogged city streets. Sensing an opportunity to revamp Medan’s transport system, ITDP Indonesia set up a plan last year to introduce BRT. But first the Jakarta-based office had to find an entrée with the Batak.

While also home to Javanese, Chinese, Indians, and Malays, some 6.1 million Batak people are the largest ethnic group in North Sumatra. The Batak have a reputation as blunt, loud, and to the point – all expressed in a thick accent. They maintain a patriarchal society with exogamous patrilineal clans known as “marga”. Kinship ties remain the primary system of social organization among Batak, which can make it even harder for outsiders to approach them.

Bataks run the private transport operations, making them key to any successful BRT rollout in the city. Luckily, ITDP Indonesia had an ace up its sleeve: Ria Roida Minarta and Ferdinand Parulian Marterer, staffers with Batak bonafides. Both of Ria’s parents are Batak, while Ferdinand has Batak blood on his mother’s side.

With that local connection, Ria and Ferdinand were able to make inroads with the mini-bus drivers and operators. “I sell my family name,” admitted Ria with a laugh. “Being Batak is a privilege. For Batak people, if you meet
other Batak in any places in this world, they will consider you as their family.”

Ria used her family background to get past the Bataks’ gruff exterior. “Batak people are known for being unapproachable – especially to new people,” she said. “Their personality makes people really hesitant to communicate with them. But once you know them, they are really warm-hearted and friendly.”

Batak transport operators run the city transport system. They sell the vehicles, route permission, licenses, and everything that a driver would need to operate a mini-bus. With the help of Medan’s transport agency, Ria and Ferdinand reached out to all 11 transport operators in order to meet with them in person.

“Instead of gathering them in one room and potentially causing a ruckus because they will argue with each other, we decided to meet them separately in person,” explained Ria.

Calling her Batak background “an effective ice breaker”, Ria said, “From the very first time I mentioned my family name, they started asking me about my hometown, about my parents and ancestors. It made the conversation more casual and comfortable, because they feel that I am one of them.”

Ferdinand, meanwhile, is not technically considered Batak because their lineage is patrilineal, but he is fluent in Bahasa Indonesia and he speaks with an accent similar to the Batak style of speaking. As a result, the transport operators grew comfortable with him as well.

From these conversations, all lubricated by local coffee and Batak food, Ria and Ferdinand got the information they needed and came to understand the transport operators’ concerns. “They are afraid they will lose their jobs,” said Ria.

However, legally speaking, the route permissions doled out by the mini-bus operators are, in fact, licenses to run buses. It was only in 1990 that a transportation cooperative established itself in Medan and began plying routes with mini-buses. As a result, if Medan adopts a BRT system, the operators can continue to use the same licenses. “They accepted it very well,” Ria said. “They were relieved that what they thought about BRT all this time was not right.”

Once they had assuaged the operators, Ria and Ferdinand then did some detective work as they tried to cross-reference what the operators told them with the drivers’ own experience. Their Batak background again came in handy here. To investigate, they disguised themselves as locals and chatted up the drivers, who most of the time also own the mini-bus.

They plied drivers for information about the mini-bus’ daily earnings, and the costs of maintenance and of buying the mini-bus from the operator, all of which would factor into their BRT proposal. But this gumshoe reporting had its tedious moments as they jostled with other passengers. “The hardest thing was waiting for a mini-bus that has an empty front seat, so we can talk freely with the driver,” Ria said.

As a result of the Batak connection, ITDP Indonesia’s role as a moderator between the government and the operators brought significant progress to Medan’s developing BRT system. The local government is now more confident about implementing the plan. They are willing to join upcoming site visits to Guangzhou and Yichang, and have even contributed novel ideas on BRT lane segregation and enforcement.

Designs for Medan’s BRT are expected to be ready by early 2017. Implementation should soon follow, as the Medan Department of Transportation agreed to pour Rp. 100 billion ($US 7,459,000) from the Regional Development Budget into non-motorized transport improvements along the BRT corridor by next year. All in all, being a Batak paid off handsomely.