

# Land grab at Nadzab?

by Colin Filer

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Nadzab Tomodachi International Airport in Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea

Photo Credit: [Facebook/JICA PNG](#)

On 22 September 2025, readers of PNG’s national newspapers were told that Lands Minister John Rosso had used the power of compulsory acquisition granted to him by Section 12 of the *Land Act 1996* to take control of a large area of land (about 862 hectares) in the vicinity of the new Nadzab Tomodachi International Airport in Morobe Province. This is known to the Lands Department as Markham Portion 78. The minister’s action did not come as a complete surprise, but it does need some explanation.

The story begins in August 2009, when the Lands Department issued a special agricultural and business lease (SABL) over Portion 78 to the Orognaron land group based in Gabsongkeg village in the Wampar local-level government (LLG) area. The land group promptly subleased the land to a company called Markham Realty Development Ltd (MRDL).

But things got complicated in 2016. Amendments to the *Land Registration Act 1981* that came into effect in 2012 gave land groups the right to own land directly. Taking advantage of this change, the Orognaron land group obtained a certificate of title to Portion 78 in 2016, effectively replacing the SABL arrangement.

MRDL fought back, taking the matter to court. They argued the title substitution threatened the validity of the sublease issued in 2009. In 2023, however, the National Court ruled in favour of the Orognaron land group. The [court’s decision](#) rested on two key points. First, a commission of inquiry had previously recommended converting SABLs to land group titles once such ownership became legal. Second, the court observed that the sublease agreement had been unfair to many customary landowners who had not agreed to it, and that MRDL had not delivered on its promise to develop the “Wampar Township”.

To understand why this land matters so much, we need to look at the broader development plans for the area.

There has been talk of developing a new township around the airport since 2005, but the talk only got serious when the Japanese Government agreed to provide

financial support for the [Nadzab Airport Redevelopment Project](#) in 2015. The airport itself occupies two blocks of land (Portions 401 and 402) that were alienated from customary ownership in 1973. The redevelopment project was completed in 2023.

In the meantime, the Japanese government had also provided support for the production of the [Lae-Nadzab Urban Development Plan](#), which was to be implemented over a ten-year period from 2016 to 2025. This plan envisaged the creation of the “Nadzab Airport Science City” — a new urban centre close to the airport.

When John Rosso was appointed lands minister in 2019, he naturally took an interest in these plans. As the MP for the Lae Open electorate, he chairs the Lae City Authority (LCA) which was established by an [act of parliament](#) in 2015. Importantly, the LCA’s jurisdiction extends beyond Rosso’s electorate into the Wampar LLG area in the Huon Gulf electorate — most notably, the part that includes Nadzab Airport.

In 2020, Rosso was quoted as saying that the government was [aiming to acquire](#) 9,000 hectares of customary land in the vicinity of the airport. Of this, 4,000 hectares would be converted into state leases while the rest would be “given back” to the customary landowners. In 2023, he was [quoted as saying](#) that the process of acquisition was “about 90% complete” and designated the Nadzab Township Development Project as a “pilot project” under the National Land Partnership Policy Framework, with an annual budget of K200 million.

We do not know whether all 9,000 hectares belong to members of the Gabsongkeg community, but we do know they claim customary ownership of Portions 401 and 402 (the airport land), as well as Portion 78.

In 2020, it was [reported that a team](#) led by the chairman of the Morobe Provincial Land Board had met with the leaders of nine local clans, including Orognaron, to discuss the redevelopment of the airport. The clan leaders called for “equal participation” in the project. A task force was established to help register all nine clans as incorporated land groups. According to the National Gazette, most were indeed registered by 2020, but only two — Orognaron and Ziaganchon — have actually registered formal titles over their land.

The Gabsongkeg community’s frustration became visible in 2023, when members of the Orognaron group [reportedly led a protest](#) outside the gates of the new airport. They complained that they had not received their K5,000 annual lease payment for the airport land since 2013. Minister Rosso promised to investigate, though there is no clear evidence that he had started compulsory acquisition proceedings at that

point.

The community's concerns intensified when they learned of the minister's plans to establish an entirely new entity: the Nadzab Land Development Authority (NLDA).

On 30 July 2025, Rosso presented parliament with four bills: one establishing the NLDA and three others amending the *Land Act 1996*, the *Land Registration Act 1981* and the *Physical Planning Act 1989*. All four passed with an overwhelming (61-1) majority and may be certified before the end of the year.

Based on [national TV coverage](#) of Rosso's presentation of the NLDA bill, the NLDA will henceforth become the agency responsible for implementing the Nadzab Township Development Project. It appears the agency will "mobilise" the remaining customary land and transfer it to private sector partners who will actually build the town.

When Gabsongkeg community leaders heard about the legislation, they [promptly objected](#). They claim Rosso's attempt to acquire Portion 78 contradicts a National Court order — reportedly obtained by MRDL, which must have reconciled with the Orognaron land group and passed on the information. MRDL now says it is looking for partners to invest in the construction of the [Markham Valley Estate](#) on Portion 78 by 2033.

The court order is not publicly available but, if it exists, how does Minister Rosso believe he can override it?

The answer could lie in recent amendments to the *Land Act 1996*. Section 72 now allows the minister to grant leases over state land to entities of his choosing, bypassing the provincial land boards that previously held this power. In the case of Portion 78, it would appear that a lease to MRDL is not the minister's preferred option.

The compulsory acquisition appears to be one piece of a much larger land mobilisation process under the National Land Partnership Policy Framework. This process involves establishing several new statutory bodies, including the [Special Economic Zones Authority](#), the LCA and the NLDA.

While the government may view this as an essential condition for the implementation of its national development agenda, legislating increased ministerial discretion is questionable policy, especially for contentious land issues.

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