

Self-Determination Conflict Profile

Aceh

By Anthony L. Smith

(We offer this analysis as part of FPIF's Self-Determination and Governance project. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the FPIF staff or the boards of either sponsoring organization. Comments are welcome. Please send to Tom Barry <tom@irc-online.org>.)



History

Aceh is the northern-most province of Indonesia, and is located on the island of Sumatra. Currently, it is the scene of Indonesia's worst internal conflict.

In times past, Aceh was a major regional power with its own history apart from Indonesia. Aceh was the entry point of Islam to Southeast Asia, and now has a population that is more orthodox than in most parts of Indonesia. Aceh first enters the historical record in 1292 when Marco Polo visited its coastal Samudra region and noted that the residents of this coastal area were Islamic. References to Aceh's Islamic heritage also appear in the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals).

Aceh assumed prominence under Sultan Iskandar Muda, who lived from 1581-1636 and established Aceh's golden age in the 17th century. Iskandar Muda presided over an unprecedented expansion of territory and involvement in the region's spice trade, which was as vital to the global economy then as oil is today. From this time, a triangular competition emerged between the sultanates of Melaka, Johore, and Aceh, and later with the colonial powers who subsequently entered the region. Aceh expanded over

much of Sumatra, parts of Malaya, and there is also a widespread belief that even Singapore was once a tribute territory. Succeeding Iskandar Muda was his son, Iskandar Thani, who was in turn succeeded by four female Sultans—beginning a robust Acehese tradition of female leaders and heroes.

As the Netherlands slowly but surely took control of what was to become the Dutch East Indies, Aceh was the last, and a very late, addition to this sprawling empire. In 1873 the Dutch attempted to conquer the province but were initially repelled by what was said to be the most organized and determined resistance they had ever encountered. The "Aceh War" (or the "Dutch War" as it is called in Aceh) lasted until the early 20th century, with sporadic guerrilla attacks continuing after the war had ended. Japan's incursion into the Pacific finally removed the Dutch presence in Aceh, and Dutch troops and administrators were not to return after the end of WWII.

Aceh participated heavily in the independence war fought against the Dutch from 1945-1949. However, resentments soon emerged over Indonesia's failure to make Aceh a separate province. In the 1950s, the

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Self-Determination

Regional Overview

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Darul Islam rebellion erupted in parts of Java and in Aceh. Darul Islam was a movement that wanted Indonesia to become an Islamic state, but it never advocated independence for Aceh or for any of its other strongholds. The Darul Islam movement disintegrated in Aceh when its leaders were co-opted into government and Aceh was given special provincial status.

From the 1960s Aceh entered into a period of relative peace, but in 1976 Hasan di Tiro and a small number of supporters proclaimed that Aceh was independent. Di Tiro, who has lived most of his life in exile in Sweden as a well-to-do businessman, is a descendant of a famous family of Muslim clerics and is the grandson of one of the most famous war leaders from Dutch times. The di Tiro family asserted its claim to Aceh's sultanate. Hasan di Tiro founded the Aceh/Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF), which was later dubbed Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM or Free Aceh Movement).

GAM, engaging largely in a propaganda campaign, did finally attract the attention of the Indonesia government and countermeasures were enacted. In the early 1980s, GAM was largely forced into exile, with a cadre of 250 going to Libya for training. Both Libya and GAM have, in recent times, tried to downplay this link; GAM does not wish to be linked to international terrorism, while Libya has decided to support Indonesia's territorial integrity. In 1989, many of the GAM members arrived back in Aceh, posing a military threat and Indonesia declared martial law, which temporarily stemmed the self-determination movement. However, the conduct of the Indonesia armed forces and police during the 1990s almost certainly led to a massive shift in public opinion—if not for GAM, at least for independence from Indonesia.

The security forces, in an attempt to round up hardcore GAM members, engaged in widespread human rights abuses. Large numbers of civilians were

killed or tortured, and villages with suspected GAM links were systematically targeted through sexual assaults on women. By the time that the Suharto government fell in May 1998, the Acehnese population was seething with anger at the Indonesian military. In this new era of reformasi, popular demands for greater autonomy or independence became vociferous.

In 1999 a student-led coalition of about one-hundred NGOs emerged called SIRA (Aceh Referendum Information Center). Although SIRA is often treated by the military as a subset of GAM, it is a fundamentally different organization. SIRA's key demand has been to ask for a referendum on the issue of Aceh's future, and on November 9, 1999, possibly one-fourth of the entire Acehnese population descended on the capital city of Banda Aceh to demand a referendum.

Demands for an East Timor-style referendum reached fever pitch that year, fuelled by an array of factors, including the following: unfulfilled promises made by the then Indonesian president; two widely publicized massacres by the military earlier that year; and the Indonesian government allowing the East Timor ballot, raising expectations that a similar event might occur in Aceh.

There is a misperception in Jakarta, and in some quarters of the international media, that the rebellion in Aceh is somehow Islamic in character. There are a number of reasons for this conflation—including Aceh's conservative brand of Islam, di Tiro's lineage, and the Darul Islam rebellion of the past—but equating Aceh's self-determination movement with Islamist demands is misguided. But successive Indonesian governments have seen the extension of Syariah law in Aceh as the answer to the problem of Aceh. Syariah is now part of a new autonomy package in Aceh, which no doubt enjoys some popularity in Aceh itself, but it fails to address the real causes of the rebel movement or the widespread support for independence generally. Groups

demanding independence have generally not advocated for Syariah, while those who have pushed for a greater role for Islam in public affairs are usually clerics linked to pan-Indonesianist organizations like the Council of Ulama or Muhammadiyah.

Despite democratization in Indonesia, the Aceh situation has not improved. In fact, 2001 has been the worst year on record for deaths as a result of the violence that has occurred since GAM was founded; international NGOs estimate that around 1,500 have died this year, an estimated 70% of whom were noncombatants. Human rights abuses are committed by both sides, with the security forces clearly using a very loose definition of who constitutes a GAM member, while GAM itself has targeted transmigrants of Javanese descent. GAM, while wracked by splinter factions, is probably now stronger than it has ever been with around 10,000-15,000 armed cadre members. The continuation of human rights abuses explains why many Acehnese still demand independence from Indonesia. There is still no proper due process of law in Aceh. Another major factor has been the perceived economic exploitation; Aceh provides 30% of Indonesia's gas exports but has remained one of the poorest provinces.

Main Actors

The Republic of Indonesia is represented in the conflict through the 30,000 strong security forces—nominally under police control—which include the military (TNI; Tentara Nasional Indonesia) and the Republic of Indonesia Police (POLRI). Newly formed police units, called Mobile Brigades (BRIMOB), have also been introduced. Pro-government civilian militias also operate alongside conventional units.

The titular head of GAM is Hasan di Tiro. The exiled leadership often uses the moniker Aceh/Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF). The military wing in Aceh is known as AGAM.

A splinter faction, now renounced by official GAM, is the MP-GAM (Majelis Pemerintahan—Gerakan Aceh Merdeka).

The province of Aceh is run by a governor, who is appointed by, and answerable to, the regional parliament. The United Development Party (PPP) of Indonesia's vice-president is quite strong in Aceh, with elected representatives in the parliament also from the National Mandate Party (PAN) and Golkar. The current governor, Abdullah Puteh, is a member of Golkar, which is the former ruling party of Suharto. The Muslim organization Muhammadiyah has a solid presence in Aceh, while the Council of Ulama in Aceh exerts a large influence on society. Mineral extraction has prompted the emergence of a powerful business community, including the enormous Exxon-Mobil plant at Lhokseumawe, known as PT Arun.

Aceh has numerous domestic NGOs. SIRA advocates a referendum as a peaceful means to solve the conflict. Koalisi NGO HAM (Coalition of Human Rights NGOs) and FP-HAM (Forum Peduli Hak Asasi Manusia: Human Rights Investigation Forum) are umbrella organizations for human rights groups that monitor human rights abuses and act as feeder groups of information to international bodies like Amnesty International and Asia Watch. Flower Aceh has been active on women's and human rights issues. An important international NGO involved in Aceh is the Swiss-based Henry Dunant Center (HDC) which brokers the dialogue between the Republic of Indonesia (RI) and GAM. Various UN agencies, such as UNDP and UNHCR, are also present in the province.

Proposed Solutions and Prospects

Successive governments in Indonesia have not considered independence (or a referendum on the issue) for Aceh, nor are they ever likely to ever do so.

Proposals for a referendum are currently ruled out by Jakarta, because it would raise the possibility of independence—and the independence option stands a strong chance of actually winning if the 1999 rally is any indication. Aceh remains part of the Indonesian heartland and its loss would be a far greater national trauma than the loss of East Timor. Considerable energy has been expended in diplomatic lobbying to ensure that the world's states still recognize Indonesia's territorial integrity.

The proposed solution from Jakarta has been to offer Aceh special autonomy (which is only mirrored by a similar deal with Irian Jaya/West Papua). In June 2001 a regional autonomy package was proposed that would allow the province of Aceh (now renamed Nanggroe Aceh Darusalam or NAD) to retain 70% of provincial revenues from 1 January 2002 (it was previously less than 5%) and implement aspects of Syariah law.

The return of revenue is a crucial step to resolution of this conflict, however it does not address the general human rights problem and the total lack of law and order in the province. Although human rights abuses are perpetrated by both the military and GAM, clearly the Acehnese feel completely alienated by the actions of the Indonesian security forces.

In 2000, President Abdurrahman Wahid initiated a dialogue process with GAM, with the Swiss-based NGO Henry Dunant Center (HDC) as the facilitator. A "Humanitarian Pause" was negotiated but after some initial success the ceasefire was undermined by both sides. Dialogue continues with HDC assistance, in Switzerland and in Aceh itself, but the government of Indonesia and GAM remain deadlocked on a number of issues, including a GAM proposal to bring in international observers to monitor future ceasefire deals. Recent events have caused GAM to question the whole process. GAM emissaries to the dialogue process in Banda, Aceh were arrested and jailed by

police in July 2001. Abdullah Syafi'ie, GAM's Aceh commander, was assassinated along with his pregnant wife on January 22, 2002. The security forces seem determined to "solve" the Aceh problem through force of arms—even at times undermining the efforts of the civilian leadership.

In a trip in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks, Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri publicly linked the problems of Aceh as being akin to the terrorism threatening the U.S. However, although there are parallels with Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines, it is unlikely that Aceh will come to be viewed as a problem of "Muslim terrorists" by the U.S. State Department. In fact the groups targeted by the United States as terrorists in Indonesia, like Islamic Defenders Front and Laskar Jihad, not only refuse to link with GAM, but renounce the movement as traitors to the Republic and apostates. But to avoid being caught up in the whirlwind resulting from the September 11 attacks, the GAM leadership-in-exile (based in Sweden) released a statement four days after the attack declaring "We support and firmly stand behind the United

States in its drive against terrorism...". The reason for such a strong stance is obviously aimed at distancing the movement from groups like Al-Qaeda. GAM's statement after the attacks was far less equivocal than that of the Indonesian government itself.

The U.S. Role

Many countries have simultaneously expressed their support for Indonesia's territorial integrity as well as showing concern about the conduct of the security forces in Aceh. The U.S. government is no exception. Much of this diplomacy remains behind the scenes, but occasional remarks surface publicly. In a recent official letter to Singapore's *Straits Times* (4 December 2001), an official at the U.S. Embassy in Singapore clarified the U.S. stance as being one of encouraging Indonesia to ensure that Aceh remains a part of Indonesia's sovereign territory through improvements to human rights and welfare. Public affairs counsellor, Greta N. Morris, quoted U.S. Admiral Denis Blair, commander of CINCPAC, as saying: "We believe that the actions of the police and the armed forces need to respect human rights, not just because

of what the U.S. and other countries think, but because that will only be effective in the long term." Although a full resumption of military-to-military ties with Indonesia is largely contingent on resolution of issues surrounding East Timor, vertical and horizontal conflicts elsewhere in Indonesia are of some concern to U.S. personnel concerned about the political and economic stability of Indonesia. Annual State Department human rights reports have generally given unfavorable commentary on the conduct of the security forces in Aceh, but they have also stressed the poor record of GAM units as well.

Significant U.S. investments are also impacted by the conflict, notably the Exxon-Mobil investment at Lhokseumawe. Three battalions of Indonesian soldiers protect this area alone.

Ethnic Composition

Acehnese: 90%

Others: Gayo, Alas, Chinese, Indonesian transmigrants

(Anthony L. Smith is a fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore.)

For More Information

Internet Links

<http://acehnet.tripod.com/>
<http://www.aceh.org/>
<http://www.atjehetimes.com/>
<http://www.aceh.org/ifa/>
<http://www.gn.apc.org/tapol/>
<http://www.ngo-ham-aceh.org/>
<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/aceh/>
<http://www.acehdev.com/>
<http://www.newschool.edu/gf/news/hamzah-intro.htm>
<http://www.acehcenter.s5.com/>
<http://www.crisisweb.org/projects/reports.cfm?keyid=5>
<http://hem.passagen.se/freeacheh/>

Mailing list

<http://www.topica.com/lists/aceh-list/>
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aceh/>
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ASNLF/>

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