

Aceh: Elections and the Possibility of Peace

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Aceh: Elections and the Possibility of Peace

Edward Aspinall *

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Introduction

Edward Aspinall from the Australian National University writes that "Aceh has become a possible model for resolving conflicts in other parts of the world, not only because of the remarkably low level of violence which has accompanied it, but also because of the remarkable attitudinal change it has brought about on the part of the main players." "At this point," argues Aspinall, "the signs are mostly hopeful, and it seems churlish to point to long-term dangers. Nevertheless, the enmities on both sides run deep and resumption of violence, albeit on a smaller scale, still can't be ruled out in the future. It's worth remembering that GAM itself began life in the 1970s as a response to disillusionment with a peace settlement, reached in the early 1960s, for an earlier round of conflict in the 1950s."

Essay - Aceh: Elections and the Possibility of Peace

As the sun set on 15th August 2006, I was in Banda Aceh with a crowd of several hundred people

watching a ceremony to commemorate the signing of the Helsinki peace accord one year earlier. After speeches, prayers for peace and an impressive Hollywood-cum-traditional Acehnese dance spectacular, the band struck up a familiar tune: the Indonesian nationalist song, *Padamu Negeri* (To You, My Nation).

The most important dignitary there, Indonesian Vice President Jusuf Kalla strode onto the podium, faced the crowd and began to sing (public singing is a big part of Indonesian political culture). Before long, he beckoned the senior Free Aceh Movement (GAM, *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*) leader present, "Prime Minister" Malik Mahmud to join him. Malik walked awkwardly to the stage, linked arms with the vice-president and looked very uncomfortable. His lips moved a little, but the audience was too far away to know if any sound was coming out.

Malik's awkwardness was understandable. For one thing, a classic diasporan nationalist, he was born in Singapore and had lived all his life outside Indonesia. It's possible he didn't know the lyrics of the song. More obviously, however, this seemed to be a very public recantation, humiliation almost. Two years earlier, Malik and other GAM leaders like him had poured scorn on Indonesian nationalism and its symbols. Now they were being expected to publicly pledge their loyalty to them. Had all the talk of "compromise", respecting the "dignity" of both sides and "self-government" which accompanied the signing of the Helsinki accord come to this?

Two days later, on the morning of 17 August 2006, I was meeting with another senior GAM official. He was staying inside his office, and was not going to go outside until the afternoon. Nor was he taking any telephone calls. The reason? August 17 is the anniversary of Indonesia's independence declaration, the country's national day. On this day during the conflict years, GAM fighters would try to organize boycotts of the ceremonies, burn Indonesian flags, and sometimes launch attacks on parade grounds. Now they were expected to attend. He laughed and shrugged his shoulders as he explained the situation: "Well, the officials know that they have to invite us, but they also know that we'll feel uncomfortable coming, so it's better this way. In a year or two, we'll be able to go to these events, but not yet. They understand."

But not everybody did understand. A few days later, and I was back in Jakarta in a meeting with senior government security officials. "Did you know", one of them asked my colleague and me, "that on 17 August, throughout Aceh, GAM people did not attend the commemorations, though they were all invited. Only two of them came, in the whole of Aceh." This was proof, he said, that GAM still harboured separatist desires. When I explained what the GAM leader had said to me, he shook his head at my naiveté for believing that there had been a fundamental change of heart on GAM's part. It would be "dangerous", he said ominously, if any former GAM leader won the forthcoming local government elections.

In these three apparently insignificant episodes, we can catch a glimpse of just what the Aceh peace process (so far) has achieved, but we can also see signs of the challenges to come.

The Helsinki Process and the Elections

The elections last Monday 11 December 2006 were won by a former GAM official, Irwandi Yusuf, along with his running mate, a former student activist, Muhammad Nazar. The results are not yet finalized, but "quick counts" announced on the night of the poll suggest they won with about 39 percent of the vote, well over the 25 percent minimum needed to avoid a second round. Their victory was not predicted by any opinion poll. Less noticed in the international press, but equally significant, elections were also held in 19 districts and urban municipalities, and it appears that GAM candidates won about half of these elections as well.

This outcome was possible because in Aceh, unlike in other parts of Indonesia, independent candidates are now allowed to run for local government positions; elsewhere, candidates must be endorsed by political parties or coalitions of parties winning a minimum percentage of the vote in the legislative election in the relevant region. In turn, only political parties which can show that they have a nationwide reach are allowed to run in Indonesian elections, a provision that was designed specifically to head off "disintegrative" tendencies. Allowing independent candidates was one of the provisions of the Helsinki peace accord that was designed to win over GAM, allowing it an opportunity to win power in Aceh without forcing its members to join any of the existing national parties.

The Helsinki peace process itself had begun immediately after the devastating 26 December 2004 tsunami. There had been earlier talks and agreements in Aceh, but these had always broken down amidst accusations of spoiling behaviour by both sides. What made the Helsinki process stick, above all, was that GAM now agreed to put aside its demand for Aceh's independence, and instead accepted a compromise formula of "self-government" for Aceh within the Indonesian state. This change of heart was conditioned both by the military losses GAM had suffered on the ground since the Megawati Soekarnoputri government had launched a major counter-insurgency offensive in May 2003, as well as by the great human suffering caused by the tsunami. On the government side, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his deputy, Jusuf Kalla, were also much more committed to staring down resistance to the peace deal from nationalist politicians and military officers, and to offering real concessions to GAM.

Many people have depicted last week's elections and the Helsinki peace deal which preceded it as "victories for democracy". In one sense, that's true enough, of course, but the conflict in Aceh was never really about democracy, or at least not since 1998. In that year, the Suharto regime collapsed and Indonesia as a whole became democratic, more or less. For the next seven years, Aceh did not experience the same degree of democratic change ushered into other parts of the country. Instead, the military there continued to wield great influence as it strove to eradicate the insurgency and suppress pro-independence agitation. If the conflict in Aceh had merely been about democracy, then the collapse of the Suharto regime would have ended it.

The conflict was first and foremost about where the boundaries of the political community should lie. In the vision of GAM, Aceh was an entirely separate nation from Indonesia, a "successor state" to the pre-colonial Acehese sultanate. Its vision was intransigent on this score: the movement's founder, Hasan di Tiro, used to describe Indonesia as a nonsensical fabrication and said that Acehese who thought of themselves as Indonesians were insane. After 1998, GAM leaders used to think that Indonesia was on the verge of disintegration, an outcome they relished and hoped to accelerate.

Once GAM leaders relinquished the goal of independence, they had to be offered a face-saving mechanism to integrate them into mainstream politics. But they also wanted an opportunity to gain political power. While the Helsinki Agreement was thus packaged as an offer of "democracy" to the people of Aceh, it was always understood that it was at core about offering GAM a means to compete for power. This was why allowing independent candidates (and allowing the formation of local political parties, another point in the Helsinki Agreement) became the key deal-breaker.

With this background in mind, the tremendous achievement of the Helsinki process is plain to see. Aceh has become a possible model for resolving conflicts in other parts of the world, not only because of the remarkably low level of violence which has accompanied it, but also because of the remarkable attitudinal change it has brought about on the part of the main players. Here much of the credit belongs with the former GAM rebels, who as the uncomfortable scene at the start of this essay suggests, have shown remarkable discipline in working within the Indonesian system they once opposed. They have avoided antagonizing hard-liners in Jakarta by even hinting that the old

dream of a Free Aceh remains alive, and they've kept the former guerilla fighters under control. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and his deputy, Jusuf Kalla, also deserve great credit for dealing with obstruction in the national parliament and, most importantly, preventing the kind of spoiling activity by elements in the security apparatus that had destroyed previous peace efforts.

GAM's victory

But if former GAM members have so far had to swallow their disappointments and humiliations, now is the moment of their triumph. What propelled Irwandi Yusuf and Muhammad Nazar, the winning candidates, to victory, was not a belief on the part of the Acehnese population that they represented the greatest chance for "democracy". Instead, it was that they were leaders of the former Acehnese struggle and were seen as standing for the sense of heightened Acehnese identity and grievance inherited from it.

Irwandi was a former propagandist and military strategist for GAM, and his campaign was supported by most of the former GAM military field commanders and their network. Arguably, the real vote winner was his running mate, Muhammad Nazar who back in 1999-2000 was the leader of a student group which organized massive rallies in favour of an independence referendum. He was famous for his fiery speeches condemning Indonesian "tyranny" and "colonialism".

Like other former pro-independence leaders, both of them have so far shown great restraint and now stress that they can cooperate with Jakarta, though suspicion of them runs very deep in the political and security establishment. During their campaign speeches, most of their promises were about developing the Acehnese economy and improving the lot of ordinary Acehnese. In this respect, they differed little from the other candidates.

One thing did distinguish them, however, and was perhaps indicative of the future: they promised that they would fight to amend the "Law on the Government of Aceh", passed last August by Indonesia's parliament. This Law was mandated by the Helsinki Agreement, but is viewed by former GAM members as not fulfilling all of the articles of the agreement. In interviews last August, both candidates said that now was not the time for a "safety player" to lead Aceh's government; Aceh would instead need tough leaders who were prepared to stand up to Jakarta to ensure that the gains of the Helsinki accord were not eroded.

At the symbolic level, too, Irwandi and Nazar distinguished themselves from the other candidates. Many people have noted that they were the only candidates to wear traditional Acehnese formal dress for their photographs on the ballot paper, underlining their commitment to Acehnese identity. Since winning the governorship, Irwandi has insisted that it is permissible for himself and his followers to display the old GAM flag (black and white stripes and a crescent moon and star on a red background). Indeed, he pinned a badge with the symbol on it onto his jacket on the night of his victory. Government and military officials have said display of the flag violates the peace accord, because it implies support for independence. In Indonesian political culture, where one's national allegiance is measured by the outward display of loyalty to fetishised symbols of the state, and in the context of a conflict which was about identity, such moves can take on a significance that is difficult for outsiders to fathom.

Future prospects

As Irwandi and Nazar take on the responsibility of running a government, rather than opposing one, it's possible that the heightened sense of Acehnese identity and grievance with Jakarta which underpinned the conflict will fade. They and their immediate supporters will doubtlessly become much absorbed by the difficult technical challenges of running a government and trying to satisfy

the expectations of their followers for improved economic conditions. They know that this process will require many compromises, and that they'll need to avoid antagonizing Jakarta. Presumably, some of the aspirations of Acehese voters will be met, others will be frustrated. Disillusionment will now at least in part be directed at the former independence fighters-turned-governing elite, rather than simply at "Jakarta" as in the old days.

But it's also likely that there will be numerous points of friction between the new government in Banda Aceh and the national government in Jakarta. Tension and debate on a vast array of issues - from the apportionment of natural gas revenues, to the curriculum in Acehese schools - is possible. The central government still reserves the right to vet provincial regulations and, if they find them to contradict superior laws, annul them. In this way, the old sense of Acehese grievance could well live on, but will be re-cast as a center-periphery struggle between different levels of democratic government.

It is too early to make long-term predictions about how the contrasting pressures of co-optation and confrontation will play themselves out. At this point, the signs are mostly hopeful, and it seems churlish to point to long-term dangers. Nevertheless, the enmities on both sides run deep and resumption of violence, albeit on a smaller scale, still can't be ruled out in the future. It's worth remembering that GAM itself began life in the 1970s as a response to disillusionment with a peace settlement, reached in the early 1960s, for an earlier round of conflict in the 1950s. There's been a long term cycle of violence and peace in Aceh that stretches back over much of the last century. An ethos of armed struggle remains strong in many parts of rural Aceh. In ten years time, it's possible that there will be a new generation in Aceh disillusioned by the "betrayals" of their elders, and ready once more to take up arms.

Avoiding that outcome will require the statesmanship that has been demonstrated so far to be sustained over a long period. It will also require ordinary Acehese to feel real improvements in their living conditions.

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Nautilus invites your response

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