

ACEH: DEMOCRATIC TIMES, AUTHORITARIAN SOLUTIONS

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Indonesia's most northwestern province, Aceh, has been the scene of an independence struggle for around a generation. In spite of the end of Soeharto's authoritarian regime in May 1998, and the emergence of real democratization in the Indonesian body politic, violence in Aceh has continued to grow steadily worse, reaching record levels by the end of 2001. There is a tendency for analysts to remark that low level violence in Indonesia is the result of a break down in state control and the loss of confidence and ability in the military, which has allowed divisions exacerbated during Soeharto's New Order to come to the fore – an hypothesis that is often likened to lifting the lid off a boiling pot. It is the contention of this article that not only did Soeharto's New Order inadvertently create the insurgency problem as it stands today, through a set of debilitating policies, but that the means by which the military have attempted to “solve” this problem are barely different from that of authoritarian times. Attempts by civilian authorities to establish various peace deals have been undermined by the military, which has failed to distinguish between unarmed critics of their actions (and/or of Indonesia *per se*) and the armed rebels of the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*; GAM). This article will provide an explanation as to the nature of the conflict in Aceh, its primary causes, and attempts to alleviate the situation – including the 2001 announcement of regional autonomy for Aceh.

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Aceh's four million people are 90 per cent Acehnese and 99 per cent Muslim, making this one of the most homogenous areas of the Indonesian archipelago.² Aceh is also dubbed *Serambi Mekah*, or the "front porch of Mecca", given its prominence in the entry of Islam into Southeast Asia. The well-known Islam orthodoxy of the Acehnese, especially when placed alongside the syncretic version of the faith in parts of rural Java, has given rise to a debate about the causes of the conflict, of which there are two fundamentally opposed camps. This has implications for the solution to the problem.

The first camp posits that the rebellion in Aceh is primarily Islamist³ in nature, with human rights problems and economic underdevelopment feeding into this. The view that GAM are struggling for an "Islamic state" is repeated in a number of media sources, and it could thus be surmised that this forms the popular view of the Aceh conflict both inside and outside of Indonesia itself. Some academics have also taken this line.⁴ In Indonesia itself it has given emergence to a school of thought within policy making circles that allowing Aceh to implement Shariah law will undermine the rebellion.

The second camp has seen the rebellion more in terms of historical factors, including primordial differences, seriously compounded by human rights abuses and economic exploitation during the Soeharto era. In this view, the independence rebellion is seen as primarily nationalist/separatist in nature, with Islam playing little or no role. Most scholars have written to variations of this theme. For example, Rizal Sukma, has emphasized that the rebellion is primarily nationalist, rather than "religious", stemming from a generation of government abuses.⁵ Geoffrey Robinson has written from a similar standpoint, and places the blame for the emergence of the insurgency on abuses by government, and rejects the idea that Aceh can be understood in primordial terms – ethnic or religious. On the subject of the relationship of

² The rest of Aceh's population are either Alas and Gayo (other indigenous groups), or transmigrants. The transmigrant "category" needs some elaboration. A number of the non-Acehnese transmigrants are Javanese coffee farmers in central Aceh, who have been there since Dutch times and are now several generations old. While others shifted in during Soeharto's programme of *transmigrasi*, some assimilation has also occurred. Much like the Malay notion of *Masuk Melayu* (to become Malay), the Acehnese will accept, often through inter-marriage, assimilation of those who come to speak Acehnese and have the Islamic faith. It is also true that Acehnese leaving the Islamic faith will also leave the community, although this very rarely occurs.

³ That is the belief that Islam should be the foundation of government, or the application of Islam to political processes.

⁴ See, for example, Andrew Tan, *Armed Rebellion in the ASEAN States: Persistence and Implications*: Canberra: Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University, 2000. Tan writes "Although the rebellion is heavily Islamic in nature, there are also historical, nationalistic and economic factors at work" (p. 34) and goes on to cite the linkages with "co-religionists" in southern Thailand, Malaysia, and Libya.

⁵ See Rizal Sukma, "The Secessionist Challenge in Aceh: Problems and Prospects" in Hadi Soesastro, Anthony L. Smith and Han Mui Ling (eds), *Governance in Indonesia: Challenges Facing the Megawati Presidency*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002 (forthcoming).

Islam to the rebellion, there is the not inconsiderable point that GAM have denied that they are Islamist in any way.⁶

This author concurs with the latter school of thought. Thus it is concluded that Shariah law, as a suggested panacea for the Aceh problem, is seriously misguided and in no way addresses the problems in Aceh. As discussed next, it is argued that only through understanding the real nature of alienation, as experienced by the Acehnese, can the root causes be established. In short, establishing the functioning rule of law and returning provincial revenues for regional development will be crucial to stemming the tide of conflict.

Historical Background

The war in Aceh has become a terrible grinding conflict in which civilians have primarily become the victims. Around 1,500 lives were lost in the year 2001 due to this conflict, which is in fact the worst death rate since the conflict began several decades ago. The year 2002 may well match 2001. Most of these victims are not even protagonists in the conflict – although who constitutes a “protagonist” is very much open to a somewhat loose interpretation by both armed camps. Aceh carries a tough reputation throughout Indonesia, conjuring images of a bitter war against the Dutch, the post-Independence Darul Islam rebellion, and now a secessionist struggle. The notion that Aceh is inherently restive, or inextricably prone to rebellion, seems common amongst Indonesian officials. Yet a short survey of the past demonstrates that this somewhat pedestrian understanding obscures some important realities of the rebellion in Aceh.

On one thing all political factions within Aceh agree – that Aceh has a great history as a regional military and economic power. The regions that now constitute Aceh’s eastern coast first entered western historical record through Marco Polo’s writings. Marco Polo traveled to the Samudra coast in 1292 and reported that it was already Islamic – some centuries prior to the great waves of Islamic conversion that were to sweep Southeast Asia. References to Aceh’s Islamic heritage also appear as sidelines to the legends found in the ancient texts of the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals) and the *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* (Annals of the Kings of Pasai).

Aceh’s golden age was the Seventeenth Century, during the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda⁷ (1581-1636), when the sultanate assumed power over an unprecedented expansion of territory and involvement in the spice trade. A triangular competition emerged between the Malay-Sumatra sultanates of Melaka, Johore and Aceh, and with the colonial powers who subsequently

⁶ Geoffrey Robinson, “*Rawan* is as *Rawan* Does: The Origins of Disorder in New Order Aceh”, in Benedict R. O’G. Anderson (ed.), *Violence and the State in Suharto's Indonesia*, New York: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2001.

⁷ Sultan Iskandar Muda is still greatly revered in Aceh today. Much is named after him, including the main airport in Banda Aceh.

entered the region. Aceh controlled much of Sumatra and held sway over parts of Malaya. Iskandar Muda was succeeded by his son, Iskandar Thani, who was in turn succeeded by four female Sultans who form part of a robust Acehnese tradition of female leaders and heroes.⁸

Despite colonial endeavours into maritime Southeast Asia by several European powers, beginning with the conquest of Melaka in 1511 by Albuquerque in the name of Portugal, Aceh remained an entity apart from the Dutch East Indies (or any European power) until the late nineteenth century. Dutch control over what is now called Indonesia was a slow, evolutionary, and *ad hoc* process over around 350 years.⁹ Aceh's separate status had been guaranteed under the 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty, in which the Netherlands agreed to the British demand that Aceh retain its separate status. The Netherlands' slow expansion over other parts of Sumatra angered the Sultanate of Aceh, while piracy in the region seemed to enjoy a safe haven in Aceh. Dutch desires to subdue the Aceh gadfly grew, but they soon found that invading and possessing Aceh brought a new set of problems. In 1871 Anglo-Dutch arrangements were renegotiated, and the Netherlands was given free reign over Sumatra, including Aceh. The increasing menace of piracy, and the accusation that Aceh was a harbourer of piratical activity, provided the excuse for the acquisition of the Sultanate. The Dutch, having their offer of overlordship soundly rejected, attempted an invasion of Aceh in 1873, only to have their forces smashed by the most organized and determined resistance they had ever encountered in their conquest of the Dutch East Indies.¹⁰ Dutch forces re-entered Aceh the following year and began a long grinding war to establish "*Pax Neederlandica*" over the province. Resistance heroes like Teuku Umar, his wife Cut Nya Dhien, and Teungku Chik di Tiro emerged, and are still celebrated in Aceh and Indonesia alike.¹¹ Aceh is said to have been subdued by around 1903, when the Dutch finally defeated and killed the Acehnese Sultan, Muhammad Daud Syah. However, resistance to Dutch rule was never entirely extinguished.¹² The Acehnese, urged on by their Ulama

⁸ Female sultanates were the subject of controversy at the time, but powerful Ulama supported the reign of female monarchs. However, it seems that a debate emerged within the Islamic *ummah* (community) which linked female leadership to Aceh's declining fortunes as a commercial empire. Although women were never sultan again, other female leaders have been important in Aceh's history, most notably during the Aceh-Dutch War.

⁹ See, for example, Nicholas Tarling, *Southeast Asia: A Modern History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹⁰ The expedition of 1873 ended in ignominy for the Dutch, and with the death of expedition leader, General Kohler, and has been a source of pride ever since for the Acehnese. The spot in the middle of the capital city on which Kohler died is marked by a plaque in various languages to commemorate the event.

¹¹ Many cities in Indonesia have streets named after these three heroes. Cut Nya Dhien, a determined resistance fighter, has assumed cult like status in Aceh, and her name is still very popular as a name for girls.

¹² There is substantial disagreement amongst commentators and scholars over where to place the "book ends" on the Aceh War (or the Dutch War, as it is known in Aceh). Some argue that the war only ended with the Japanese invasion in WWII, while others suggest different dates in the early 1900s. But this is more a semantic difference as there is agreement on the

(Muslim scholars), welcomed the Japanese during WWII. After Japanese rule ended in 1945, Aceh was not reoccupied by Dutch troops (unlike the rest of Indonesia), although the province participated in the anti-colonial struggle – a point often cited by Indonesian officials as a factor to bind Aceh to the Republic of Indonesia.

The war against the Dutch exacerbated a major tension within Acehnese society, namely the division between the Ulama and the traditional aristocrats (*Uleebalang*). Although both sectors of society had been present in the struggle, as the war wore on, *uleebalang* were increasingly coopted into the Dutch administration while the Ulama assumed an even greater role in the struggle, and thus ultimately gained great legitimacy in Acehnese society. The war against the Dutch was portrayed to the Acehnese as a Jihad (or more accurately, *Jihad-ul-asghar* – holy war) against the *kafir* (unbelievers).¹³ The final chapter in this struggle was the elimination of the *uleebalang* by the Ulama in the aftermath of WWII, when the traditional upper class (or much of it) was destroyed in front of a firing squad. The Ulama not only solidified their historic status within the community, but in some cases they took the mantle of the ruling class.

After World War Two

Despite Aceh's role in the revolution, and its special character, Aceh was not given its own province. This led to widespread resentment that fed into support for the pan-Indonesian Darul Islam rebellion of the 1950s. One of several challenges to Indonesian statehood post-independence, Darul Islam was strong in Aceh and parts of Java.¹⁴ Darul Islam was a response to the emerging secular and pluralist state system, based on the principles listed in the constitution (and the state motto, *Pancasila*). The movement in Aceh was eventually coopted into government administration, and rebel leader, Daud Bereueh, was given official status. Accommodation with the state was unsurprising in one sense – the movement had never advocated independence for Aceh. However, this rebellion did create the image that the Acehnese were in favour of an Islamic state, and this image stuck when events caused an independence movement to emerge in the late 1970s.

nature of the conflict in Aceh. Thus, the important point to realise is that the Dutch may have achieved a degree of pacification of Aceh by the early 1900s, but lower level resistance carried on after that point. Aceh remained a dangerous place for Dutch officials and their proxy forces, and Dutch rule never returned to Aceh even after the defeat of Japan.

¹³ It did not help that the Dutch had burned down the main mosque in 1873 in an effort to subdue the Acehnese. They subsequently rebuilt the mosque in Banda Aceh, where it remains to this day, in a far grander fashion than before.

¹⁴ See Nazaruddin Sjamsuddin, *The Republican Revolt: A Study of the Acehnese Rebellion*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1985; and Rizal Sukma, "The Secessionist Challenge in Aceh: Problems and Prospects" in Hadi Soesastro, Anthony L. Smith and Han Mui Ling (eds), *Governance in Indonesia: Challenges Facing the Megawati Presidency*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002 (forthcoming).

There is a tendency for both protagonists in the conflict in Aceh to argue that resistance in Aceh follows a linear path. In other words, the Acehnese have a propensity to rebel, and thus emerged the resistance to the Dutch, the Darul Islam rebellion, and the independence struggle from 1976.¹⁵ The GAM movement also make a claim to being linked to these earlier movements in an attempt to justify the longevity of the independence cause. However, this is not entirely accurate, even if it suits both protagonists to put forward this version of history. It seems most likely that resistance to Indonesia as a state entity only emerged on the political landscape in the 1970s. Darul Islam was not an Aceh independence movement, even if regional discontent contributed to what was primarily a movement to create an Islamic state in Indonesia. What this glance at history reveals is that support for independence in Aceh may be of more recent origin than is often assumed.

At the very least the oscillations of separatist political opinion in Aceh, which appeared to be largely redundant until the 1970s but reached their apex in 1999, must have other explanations. As this essay will demonstrate, it was the repressive response of the Soeharto administration's "shock therapy" that caused the Acehnese to lose faith in the Indonesian state, rather than ethno-religious identity or that the Acehnese are by nature prone to armed rebellion. Human rights abuses and economic exploitation are the primary causes of alienation within Aceh. But these problems did not disappear with the Soeharto regime, and even in a democratizing Indonesia, substantial problems of governance remain. This explains the growing discontent over time. Unlike East Timor or Papua, where Indonesia's acquisition of these territories may have had domestic illegitimacy within these regions from the outset, Aceh has gone from being loyal to the state of Indonesia to a situation where it seems likely that the majority of Acehnese want independence – or a substantial degree of autonomy at the very least.

The Independence Movement Emerges

In 1976 Hasan di Tiro, grandson of the Aceh-Dutch War hero Chik di Tiro, gathered together a small number of supporters and issued a "Re-declaration" of Independence for Aceh. Di Tiro claimed that Aceh had never been legally part of Indonesia and set about convincing fellow Acehnese of their right to reclaim their independence. Although di Tiro claimed lineage to the Darul Islam movement (he himself had been a member), his pronouncement marked a new factor in Aceh's political environment. It established the Aceh-

¹⁵ This was a strong theme that came through during interviews I conducted with officials and those sympathetic to the government position in Aceh and Jakarta in July 2001. Interestingly a small number of officials actually cited Soeharto's policies as the leading cause of the conflict. One official Indonesian negotiator in Aceh even posited the argument to the author that human rights abuses were common to all of Indonesia, and therefore Acehnese should not feel that they were singled out.

Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF),¹⁶ which was later dubbed the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM) in popular usage.

From 1976 di Tiro and his supporters began to issue propaganda to highlight the independence cause. The “Re-declaration of Independence” had failed to gain any attention from the authorities given its inchoate nature. This marks the first emergence of GAM, which had grown from just a few hundred di Tiro acolytes to an armed force of thousands by the 1990s. GAM’s fortunes reveal something interesting about the nature of the conflict. Despite almost a decade of martial law under the Soeharto regime, GAM has probably been at the peak of its strength since then, in *reformasi* times.

But what was the nature of the movement that Teungku Hasan di Tiro¹⁷ founded in 1976? The ideology of GAM relies largely on the person of Hasan di Tiro himself, both as an articulator of official positions and his own heritage. Although di Tiro has lived the bulk of his life in exile in Sweden, he is descended from an Acehnese family that makes a claim to the sultanate of Aceh. Di Tiro claims that the sultanate was handed to his family before the death of the last Sultan in Dutch times.¹⁸ Di Tiro sees the independence of Aceh as inextricably linked to his own family, citing it as the reason why independence could only be reiterated in 1976. (Many of Di Tiro’s family members were killed in the war with the Dutch.) Di Tiro and his followers claim that the rule of Iskandar Muda, Aceh’s “Golden Age”, would guide their creation of a new state. This would strongly suggest the recreation of a traditional monarchy, rather than a theocratic Islamic state.

The political ideology espoused by GAM is a combination of feudalism and dependency theory, with the occasional reference to Islam. Although Islam continues to be relevant in the sense that it is the stated religion of all GAM members, and one splinter faction of GAM spoke of establishing an Islamic state, in mainstream GAM literature reference to Islam is not stressed. Di Tiro did, however, attempt to use co-religionist ties with other Muslim

¹⁶ The name, ASNLF, reveals something of di Tiro’s thinking. “Acheh” is preferred to “Aceh”, which indicates a contempt for Indonesian spellings (and indeed the language itself). “Sumatra” as a whole also appears in the name. It is well known that Iskandar Muda ruled over a substantial portion of Sumatra, and there has always been a question mark over di Tiro’s intensions with regard to the rest of the former Aceh empire (which also extended to Malaya and Singapore – it is claimed). Some commentators believe that at one stage di Tiro had a vision to preside over the whole of an independent Sumatra as the other ethnic groups broke away. Something that pervades ASNLF literature is the belief that other ethnicities should break away from the artificial “neo-colony” of Indonesia.

¹⁷ Di Tiro, like a number of others in Aceh (including some other GAM leaders), uses the title Teungku which was traditionally used for Islamic scholars. This has probably added to the impression that GAM has an Islamist agenda. However, in di Tiro’s case, the title is viewed as hereditary. With the demise of the aristocrats (*uleebalang*), the scholars and teachers of Islam filled the leadership vacuum that they created. Those who have interacted with di Tiro agree that his philosophy and outlook are aristocratic (some would even say “feudal”) rather than overtly Islamic. After nearly half a century abroad in exile, di Tiro is not noted for a strict Islamic lifestyle.

¹⁸ This claim is contested. Although the sultanate in Acehnese history has often been handed to direct descendants, there is precedent for bringing in an outsider to assume the throne.

communities to gain sympathy for his cause, especially in the early years. But di Tiro claims that the members of GAM have been labeled “Muslim fanatics” to “isolate them internationally”. A GAM official, Teuku Kamaruzzaman, told a reporter in a television interview aired in the United States on PBS that the charge of being Islamist is an “accusation [that] really insults us”.¹⁹ GAM spokesman, Sofyan Ibrahim Tiba, in the same interview, stated that “[we are] not fighting to uphold our religion, we are fighting to uphold our sovereignty”.²⁰ There is, for example, not a single mention of Islam in the “Re-Declaration of Independence of Aceh Sumatra” in 1976. What GAM literature does stress is the notion of economic exploitation and political injustice. While at times the literature is anti-western, vociferous criticism is reserved for Java, the Javanese, and above all, the government in Jakarta.

The case constructed for Aceh’s independence – as seen in di Tiro’s writing, ANSLF media statements and statements by GAM officials (including interviews with this author) – revolves around three justifications. First, Aceh’s separate history is invoked as the primary reason for Aceh’s right to independence, coupled with Indonesia’s “illegal” post-Dutch acquisition of the territory. The next two justifications refer to Jakarta’s poor record of governance to rule. Thus the second strand of thought revolves around the charge of economic exploitation by the centre, largely informed by dependency theory and socialist thought. The third justification for Aceh’s independence revolves around the theme of Indonesia’s inability to deliver justice, human rights protection generally, and democracy. (Di Tiro speaks often of “the will of the people”, although how this would be reflected in an independent Aceh is not altogether well defined.)

These themes converge around the argument that Indonesia is not just an artificial state, but in fact a “neo-colony”. Throughout GAM’s literature and statements are references to race and vitriolic statements against the state of Indonesia.²¹ The Indonesian government is described as “Javanese Indonesian colonialist” or a “lately fabricated Javanese Indonesia”. Indonesia’s governors in Aceh are dubbed “Acehnese quislings”. Indonesia itself is a “fabricated pseudo-nation” with “‘Indonesian nationalism’ ... a cover-up for the incipient Javanese nationalism”. Indonesian is viewed as a corruption of Malay and referred to as “Pidgin Malay” – a “grotesque language”. In describing Indonesia as a “neo-colony”, di Tiro argues that the state of Indonesia is simply a western (Dutch) creation, like those found in Africa and elsewhere, designed to extend the shelf life of Europe’s colonial

¹⁹ ‘A Dirty War’, *Now: With Bill Moyers*, Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), 23 May 2002.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Much of the thought presented below is taken from Tengku Hasan di Tiro, *Indonesian Nationalism: A Western Invention to Subvert Islam and to Prevent Decolonization of the Dutch East Indies*, National Liberation Front of Aceh Sumatra, 1985. Other di Tiro works (all published by the ANSLF) that repeat similar themes are: *The Legal Status of Aceh-Sumatra Under International Law*, 2 November 1980; *Indonesia as a Model Neo-Colony*, 20 August 1984; and *Aceh: A new birth of freedom*, Submission to the Parliamentary Human Rights Group, House of Lords (UK), 1 May 1992.

rule and access to resources. A strong anti-capitalist theme emerges from di Tiro's writings.

Furthermore, GAM have proved to be discriminatory in their field operations and have deliberately targeted people of Javanese origin, something perhaps in keeping with the anti-Javanese nature of di Tiro's ideology. GAM patrols routinely inspect vehicles travelling through their areas, and often claim to be looking for Javanese passengers. In the case of Central Aceh, large numbers of refugees of Javanese descent left the district in mid-2001 after intimidation (although many Acehnese were also forced out by militia groups). These refugees were Javanese transmigrants who had lived in the area since the time of Dutch rule. GAM openly admit that they are suspicious of Javanese people, whom they accuse of being spies and informers. In one interview with this author, a high ranking GAM leader stated that ethnic Javanese were most likely to be in the employ of the government, and therefore all Javanese migrants (even second and third generation) should leave Aceh until independence is achieved – and then they may return. In this same interview the leader claimed that the TNI (Indonesian military) and BRIMOB (mobile brigade police) were 80 per cent Javanese. Although this is an inflated figure, it adds to the view that the security forces represent Java, and Java's domination over Indonesia as a whole.

Fortunes of GAM

Since 1976, when GAM was born, the movement has oscillated, but has grown to be a far more substantial grouping. GAM's emergence can be seen as coming in three distinct phases, during which time the movement has been successfully targeted on the battlefield but has returned with more members and more support than before. In the first phase, between 1976 to 1982, GAM proclaimed independence and attempted to spread propaganda for independence. By the end of this phase, the GAM movement was crushed by the security forces, its main leaders either dead, in prison, or in exile. However, some core supporters went to Libya to receive training.

The second phase began with the return of 100 trained GAM operatives from Libya in 1989. In response Aceh was declared under martial law – dubbed a Military Operation Zone (DOM: *Daerah Operasi Militar*) in popular parlance – in 1989 and by late 1991 the province was largely under Indonesian government control again. Despite bringing GAM under control the DOM lasted until 1998, when it was revoked after the Soeharto government fell. By mid-1990 the number of Indonesian troops was doubled to 12,000, many of whom were veterans of the East Timor war. “Slash and burn” tactics from that campaign were employed in Aceh. This involved massive repression, with approximately 5,000-6,000 deaths, widespread torture, arrest without trial, and the systemic rape and sexual assault of women

believed to be linked, or sympathetic, to GAM.²² Common tactics were to burn the homes of suspected independence supporters, or sometimes their entire village, and conduct house-to-house searches. In the *reformasi* era that surrounded the year 1998, evidence of these abuses, including mass graves, were uncovered in Aceh and revealed to the public.

What is so significant about the DOM period is that sympathy for GAM seems to have increased enormously, as did the volunteers willing to join its ranks. Massive human rights abuses, formally revealed in 1998, were well known through stories and rumours to the Acehnese people to the extent that even now villages have come to fear a visit by the Indonesian security forces. GAM, which had traditionally been able to have some presence in Pidie, North Aceh and West Aceh, were able during the 1990s to spread the rebellion to “non-traditional” areas in the east and south due to the enormous hatred that built up because of the actions of the security forces. This phase of the Soeharto administration’s “shock therapy” did so much damage to Acehnese confidence in the Indonesian state that it is the major turning point in public opinion on the issue of separatism. Subsequent events have shown just how widespread independence feelings have become (see the Referendum section below).

The third phase, which began with the beginning of Indonesia’s *Reformasi* era in May 1998, was heralded in Aceh when the head of the armed forces, General Wiranto, announced the end of DOM. All non-organic troops were withdrawn, with nationally televised scenes of Acehnese people hurling insults, and rocks, at the departing troops. After the demise of the New Order,²³ there was a new boldness in Aceh during 1998. On 7 August

²² From the vast body of accounts collected by interested Acehnese NGOs and the Independent Commission for Investigating the Violence in Aceh (2000) it seems that victimization of women was a deliberate strategy to undermine villages thought to be sympathetic to GAM. A typical pattern that comes through in many accounts is that the men of the village would flee to the mountains to avoid the Indonesian army to avoid arbitrary arrest, torture or even death. The soldiers would assume that those fleeing were GAM members and would subject the women to sexual abuse. These tactics were very widespread and help account for levels of resentment against the Indonesian government, especially given that this has occurred with complete impunity. See, for example, the Independent Commission for Investigating the Violence in Aceh, 2000; Lukman Age and Ernayanti (eds), *Menjaring Hari Tanpa Air Mata: Catatan Peristiwa Kekerasan di Aceh Sepanjang Tahun 1999* [Towards a day without tears: Report on incidents of violence in Aceh during the year 1999], Banda Aceh: Koalisi NGO Ham [Coalition of Aceh’s Human Rights NGOs], 2000; and Interviews by the author with members of *Yayasan Flower Aceh* [the main women’s rights NGO], Banda Aceh, July 2001.

²³ The New Order was the title which Soeharto gave to his administration to distinguish it from the government of his predecessor. Among scholars there is some debate over when it can be said that the New Order came to an end. Although Soeharto resigned in May 1998, his chosen successor, B J Habibie, continued to preside over a cabinet containing many of the ministers of the previous government until the presidential election in 1999 saw Abdurrahman Wahid come to power. However, although the Habibie government was a caretaker administration, and owed its existence to the then ruling Golkar party, vast changes

1998, Wiranto apologised to the Acehnese people, which caused many onlookers to break down in tears. However, a great opportunity to improve the situation in Aceh was missed, as subsequent events were to show. This was the first of various apologies given to Aceh – Megawati also offered one soon after taking office as president in 2001. These apologies no longer carry the weight of the Wiranto apology, mainly because the problems that have beset Aceh have continued largely unabated. But one of the most critical elements of the apology is that it is an implicit acceptance of culpability for the crimes against humanity that occurred in Aceh. There can be no doubt that large numbers of extrajudicial killings, assaults, and sexual attacks did take place in Aceh – and that the security forces perpetuated many (possibly most) of them. The apologies would seem to acknowledge that fact. However, the government has failed to capitalize on whatever goodwill may have been gained in 1998. Violence returned to the province in late 1998, and over the next few years was to grow increasingly worse. In 2001, 1500 people were killed, the worst tally on record. The year 2002 would, so far, seem to be similar to the year before.

As one measure of dissatisfaction with the recent past, GAM has grown from a handful of di Tiro supporters to an estimated armed cadre which may hover around 10,000 members.²⁴ Weapons are sourced from Thailand, with funding sources in Aceh (through GAM's taxation system) and reports of support from private Malaysian sources.²⁵ In the past GAM have also purchased weapons from the security forces, although this is reportedly easier to do with organic forces.

GAM's international linkages have also undergone some revision. The main point of contact in the past had been with Libya, with Libyan leader, Qaddafi, opting to support a number of causes around the world (including the secessionist struggle in the southern Philippines). The Libyan connection is now downplayed by both GAM and Libya itself. The post-1986 Qaddafi has not only been more respectful of state sovereignty but has committed Libya to Indonesia's territorial integrity. This brings Libya in line with the rest of the member-states of the Organization of Islamic Conference in supporting Indonesia's sovereignty.²⁶ GAM, in a bid for international respectability, have also tried to distance themselves from their erstwhile Libyan connection. GAM officials now claim that their training was done by mercenaries and that it was all paid for. This line is a clear attempt to put some ideological distance

had occurred in politics and society under his tenure. Therefore this author places the end of the New Order regime at the resignation of Soeharto.

²⁴ Government estimates usually put GAM's strength at 3,000, while GAM itself claim 15,000.

²⁵ There are two possible explanations for this. First of all, a portion of the Malay community on the Malaysian peninsula can claim some Acehnese heritage and some sympathy may remain. Second, there is also a community of more recent exiles resident in Malaysia.

²⁶ Much of Indonesia's foreign policy after the events in East Timor has been to gain reassurances that the international community still respects Indonesia's sovereign territory. Reassurances have been sought with regard to Aceh, Papua and Ambon.

between GAM and the tarnished reputation of Libya, although it fails to account for why GAM operatives were allowed to train on Libyan soil in the first place. However, it is significant that GAM now wish to disavow any connection to Libya's radical foreign policy of supporting terrorist groups. Furthermore GAM deny that their members have any connection with Afghanistan, and have taken strenuous efforts not to be identified with terrorist networks like Al-Qaeda.

On 15 September 2001, in response to the terrorist attacks in the US, GAM's exile leadership issued a statement that, in part, read: "We support and firmly stand behind the United States in its drive against terrorism in whatever guise they [sic] may appear."²⁷ (This statement was, as it turned out, less equivocal than that of the Indonesian government.) Clearly this statement is designed to ensure that GAM was not caught up in the US counter response to the events of September 11. Despite this strong backing of the United States, GAM have been unable to completely escape the Al-Qaeda tag. A CNN report in July 2002 cited an intelligence report obtained in the Philippines as suggesting that GAM had links with Al-Qaeda and may provide a hiding place for fugitives from the Middle East.²⁸ GAM immediately issued a denial that either of these claims were true. It would seem obvious that GAM and Al-Qaeda are vastly different types of organizations. Indonesian groups like Laskar Jihad and the Islamic Defenders Front, sometimes seen as sympathetic to Al-Qaeda or Islamist agendas, have dubbed GAM "apostates" to the faith and "traitors" to the state of Indonesia.²⁹ The problems in Aceh relate primarily to local conditions, and linkage to problems of international terrorism would be unfortunate and wrong headed.

In the field, GAM continue to pursue a policy of armed confrontation with the Indonesian security forces. Although agreements have been negotiated, they have so far broken down. GAM officials say that they will not abandon the armed struggle in the same fashion as the Falintil in East Timor, due to a lack of trust in the military, which they believe would take such an opportunity to destroy them if they disarm or go into cantonment.³⁰ The leader of the armed wing of the GAM movement, known as AGAM, was Tengku Abdullah Syafi'i. Abdullah Syafi'i was the most powerful military commander inside Aceh until his death in January 2002 during a military operation (his pregnant wife was also killed). Indonesian negotiators had tried to bring the AGAM commander to the negotiation table for some time, but his fear of being killed had prevented this.³¹ Another important leader in Aceh is Cut Nur Asyikin who heads the important women's chapter, which includes

²⁷ Aceh/Sumatra National Liberation Front, Press Release, 15 September 2001.

²⁸ Maria Ressa, "Intelligence report: Bin Laden sought Indonesian base", CNN, 9 July 2002.

www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/southeast/07/09/indo.binladen/index.html

²⁹ Confidential Interview, Jakarta, November 2001.

³⁰ Interview with Teuku Kamaruzzaman and Nasrullah Dahlawi, GAM leaders, in Banda Aceh, July 2001.

³¹ Ibid.

the widows' battalion. Outside of Aceh, the independence movement is still under the authority of the exile community, with di Tiro as "Head of State". Di Tiro himself is now elderly and ill from several strokes, and a key di Tiro lieutenant and cabinet minister in exile, Zaini Abdullah, has emerged as the most likely successor to the ailing di Tiro. Zaini Abdullah now issues important statements and is the key signatory to the Humanitarian Pause agreement of 2000.

The Military Campaign

It is very hard to access completely the strategies of both the police and the military, however there are some observations that can be made. There are currently more than 20,000 troops in Aceh,³² supplemented by another 20,000 police (mostly mobile brigade or *Brimob*). The current operation in Aceh is formally under police authority. Recently Aceh was made its own military region, known as the Iskandar Muda Military Command. There is clear evidence that the different branches of the police and the military are not well coordinated. Many commentators, including officials and political leaders in Jakarta, have observed that the security forces have undermined the attempts to seal a peace accord. As the saying goes, there are always faults on both sides, and GAM is also responsible for not honouring agreements. However there is strong evidence that the military have undermined negotiations.

There is also indisputable evidence that the security forces have formed a very loose definition of who is a GAM member, and human rights activists have found themselves the target of accusations that they are merely a front for the separatist organization. All groups that are opposed to the military, whether they employ violent means or not, are treated as "GAM". The political movement SIRA (Aceh Referendum Information Center), which promotes a Referendum on the issue of independence, and the victims' rehabilitation group, RATA (Rehabilitation Action for Torture Victims in Aceh), have both suffered the consequences of being critical of the government. SIRA is treated as a component of GAM, while the police have been investigating a link between GAM and RATA.³³ Thus GAM is often simultaneously characterized as a ragtag outfit unresponsive to command and control on one hand, and a well coordinated conspiracy, including all the NGO groups in Banda Aceh (especially SIRA), on the other. Little distinction is made between armed belligerents, and NGO activists and critics. Thus, authoritarian methods and outright political repression may be said to live on.

While human rights abuses and assassinations became common place during the DOM phase, formally lifted in August 1998, the situation has not improved in the post-Soeharto era, apart from a respite after May 1998. Killings of both combatants and non-combatants continue to occur on a daily

³² 8,000 extra troops were sent to Aceh in July 2002.

³³ Interview with Syaifuddin Gani, an Indonesian official and negotiator in the Aceh dialogue process, in Banda Aceh, July 2001.

basis. The military campaign against the GAM has taken the form of the assassination of suspected (and unarmed) sympathizers in what *Tempo* magazine likens to Argentina's "dirty war".³⁴ Common tactics have been to leave dead bodies lying in public places and a number of villages and buildings have been torched. What makes it difficult is that both the military and GAM will invariably blame each other for these atrocities. Human rights groups have long been concerned that truth has become a major casualty of this war. Nonetheless the US State Department's human rights' report on Indonesia for 2000 holds both the security forces and the GAM responsible for "numerous" extra-judicial killings. Amnesty International has concluded that "the majority of the victims are not from the two parties to the conflict but are ordinary citizens"³⁵ – in fact probably two-thirds or more would be a reasonable estimate. Innocent civilians are killed because of family connection, suspicions, criticisms of the government campaign and so on. It cannot be denied that the military have been responsible for many of these atrocities.

The commercial imperatives that drive much of the military's actions serve to collide with the objectives of "winning hearts and minds". It is estimated that the Indonesian military obtain about 75% of their funding from "off-budget" sources. In Aceh, an extremely poor province, the large number of security personnel has proved to be a burden. The police and army have set up a network of posts and road blocks (there are 70-80 road blocks alone on the way from Banda Aceh towards Medan). These posts serve a security function, but they also allow for the collection of tolls. Cross province trips can become very expensive for a local traveller. Military control over various commercial activities, legal and illegal, is a major factor in the conflict, and includes involvement in "protection" of companies, logging, small arms, fish supply, and coffee supply, with some evidence of personnel being involved in the drugs trade.³⁶ It is estimated that TNI soldiers only receive Rp 10,000 per day in the hand (the rest of their salary stays with their family), while BRIMOB receive Rp 6,000. Incomes are heavily supplemented by "informal taxes" and the taking of goods and property. Needless to say, this places a strain on the Acehnese population and undermines goodwill.

Under Presidential Decree IV of April 2001, a six point plan was supposed to be implemented to provide a host of development *and* security measures. The plan was implemented under President Wahid, with the apparent backing of then Vice President, now President, Megawati Sukarnoputri. In reality the six point plan has focused on the security aspect of the plan. The security forces have launched the *Operasi Pemulihan Keamanan dan Penegakan Hukum (OKPH)* or "Safety Recovery Operation". The strategy has been to secure much of the Aceh countryside before implementing the development part of the six point plan.

³⁴ *Tempo Magazine*, 8 January 2001.

³⁵ Amnesty International, "Indonesia: A Cycle of Violence for Aceh's Children", November 2000.

³⁶ Lesley McCulloch, "Greed: the silent force of the conflict in Aceh", Paper presented at the Asian Studies Association of Australia, 1-3 July 2002.

The Safety Recovery Operation is being undertaken in an environment where not only are abuses in the past not subject to due process of law, but the current human rights situation is out of control. Justice has largely broken down. There is no witness protection, no due process of law for suspects, and there is not even a registrar of missing persons. There is strong evidence that the security forces have not acted in a wholly professional manner. Indonesia's official National Commission on Human Rights (*Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia* [Komnas-HAM]) has over 1616 well documented cases of military abuses on file from August 1998 to the end of 1999 – not one of which has come to trial.³⁷ *Tapol*, the London based Indonesia human rights' NGO, claims that there are a further 7,727 cases from the DOM period. Various investigations by parliament and Komnas-HAM have been concluded and culminated in two trials, but criticisms have been leveled that the punishments are too light (ranging from 2 to 10 years) considering the crimes and that those tried are scapegoats for more senior officers who have so far escaped the court proceedings. Some in the diplomatic community, and many in Aceh, question whether or not these convicts are still in jail. Furthermore, NGO groups have reported a large number of accounts by rape victims, and none of these cases have come to trial either.

As mentioned earlier, these abuses are not necessarily a thing of the past. The Network for Indonesian Democracy, Japan (NINDJA) has documented numerous incidents of threats if Indonesian flags are not flown on Indonesia's Independence Day. They also claim to have interviewed witnesses to a massacre at the Flora Bumi plantation and pinned the blame on the security forces. This incident occurred in Idi Rayeuk in which the village was burned and 40 people were massacred in August 2001. The district of East Aceh tried to send in an investigation team to do a report, but were refused access to the area by the military in a military controlled area.

However the real *cause célèbre* in Aceh was the December 2000 killing of three RATA volunteers. Four RATA activists were ambushed by BRIMOB and the civilian militia. During the attack three RATA members were killed, while one escaped to identify eight of his attackers. The survivor's account, alongside that of others, put four BRIMOB and four militia personnel in custody. However these suspects were all able to escape from custody by mid-2001. This points to what is probably the most substantial problem for the people of Aceh, in that the majority feel that justice has never been done (something freely admitted by officials), and that there is no effective law and order. This case is also clear proof that security forces have been involved in the assassination of NGO officials. Although most other cases cannot be proved, this particular episode is most likely indicative of the approach taken by the security forces. There is also the critical point that whenever human rights abuses occur there is a tendency by many Acehnese to point the finger of suspicion at the security forces (concrete evidence from the RATA and Flora Bumi killings adding to the suspicion). And the fact remains that in

³⁷ Karim D Crow, "Aceh – The 'Special Territory' in North Sumatra: A Self-Fulfilling Promise", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2000, p. 93.

many villages, even those unsupportive of GAM, they fear a visit by what they term the “Soldier-Bandits” (the Indonesia security forces) far more than a visit by GAM.

A group that has become quite powerful in Aceh is SIRA, but it is regarded as the political wing of GAM and treated accordingly. SIRA is an umbrella of more than 100 groups. Although it has no formal membership base as such, the group was able to bring massive numbers of Acehnese onto the streets during 1999 to demand a referendum. Their leader, Muhammad Nasar, is regarded by human rights groups as Indonesia’s first political prisoner since the fall of Soeharto and was sentenced to 10 months jail for “spreading hate” (later reduced by a mere 15 days, but Nasar refused the reduction). SIRA is well organized and has drawn a number of lessons from the East Timor case. Clearly SIRA is not the same as GAM by any means, but philosophically there is some overlap between the two. SIRA does not advocate violence, recognizes Indonesian state authority, and does not openly endorse independence.³⁸ Members of SIRA have been kidnapped and tortured by the police and many have found that their names are amongst the 400 or so names drawn up by the military, to identify the separatist leaders, known as the “red list”.³⁹

These outcomes all strongly indicate that there is a total failure by the security forces to make clear differentiation between armed belligerents and political opponents in Aceh. What has occurred in Aceh amounts to the silencing of armed and unarmed political opponents alike, something out of step with the core values of a liberal democracy. The complete lack of justice – or the due process of the law – in the Aceh case seriously compounds the general human rights problems. Thus it can be concluded that very little has changed in Aceh since authoritarian times. The security forces continue to employ the authoritarian methods of the past.

Demands for a Referendum

It is probably the case that the majority of Acehnese favour independence, and many who have travelled in Aceh believe that any vote on the issue would see independence win with about the same margins as it did in East Timor (that is, around the 80 percentile mark).⁴⁰ Acehnese are in the habit, whenever they see a foreigner, and they think they will get away with it, of shouting out “Merdeka” (independence). Journalists report that entire rural villages have done this to them as they arrive. This author also experienced this in the

³⁸ Based on interviews with SIRA leaders, including Muhammad Nasar (in Banda Aceh’s jail), July 2001; and an examination of SIRA literature.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ This is based on discussions with Indonesian and foreign journalists. Speculation on support for independence amongst Acehnese themselves yields vastly differing numbers with pro-government people claiming a minority support this cause, while GAM and SIRA claim close to 100% (with few estimates in the middle).

middle of the heavily patrolled capital – Banda Aceh. Graffiti demanding a referendum (often unsuccessfully painted over) appears absolutely everywhere throughout the villages between Banda Aceh and Lhokseumawe, and presumably everywhere else.

Although it would seem bold to suggest that the majority of Acehnese want independence based on anecdotal sampling, the pro-Referendum rally in 1999 is the clearest signal yet of popular opinion. However, this is not to argue that the situation is irreversible. Support for independence seems strong largely because most Acehnese are afraid of, or angry at, the security forces rather than being anti-Indonesia *per se* (although there are certainly those who fall into the latter category too).

Although some claim that anti-Indonesia feelings have been evident in Aceh all along, the year 1999 saw a climax of demands for a referendum on the issue of independence. Why was this the case? First, the *reformasi* era not only forced the military to retreat from politics (even if only partially), but the public became aware of the nature of military operations conducted in Aceh over the previous decade. There was enormous anger as the Acehnese realised that human rights had been systematically and substantially abused, and rumours were not just isolated incidents.

Second, rising anger against the military was seriously compounded by two incidents which demonstrated to Aceh that Soeharto's "shock therapy" was not over. On 3 May 1999 soldiers opened fire on a village killing 56 residents in what is known as the Simpang KKA incident in North Aceh. (The wounded were taken away and never seen again.) The killings were caught on film by an Indonesian news crew. On 23 July 1999 38 people were killed and buried in a mass grave at a Muslim boarding school in West Aceh – its exhumation was also filmed. These two events undid the goodwill gained through Wiranto's earlier apology. To make matters worse there were trials in both these cases in which light sentences were handed down to enlisted soldiers. The officers who issued the orders have never been brought to trial. It is also doubtful that trials would have happened in the first instance if not for the presence of television crews.

Third, events in East Timor in 1999, coupled with unachievable promises for a similar ballot in Aceh by the mercurial President Wahid (and other political leaders), served to heighten public clamour for a ballot and unrealistically raised expectations.⁴¹ On 9 November 1999 there was a pro-referendum rally in Banda Aceh. Estimates of the crowd that gathered in Banda Aceh range from the pro-government estimates of 300,000 attendees, supposedly threatened by GAM into attending, to NGO estimates of 2 million. Media reports suggested between 500,000 to 1 million, with large numbers also prevented from attending by police and army road blocks. (Similar rallies were held in all cities.) Whichever figure one accepts, either a majority or a

⁴¹ While Wahid was notable for his *volte face* decision making, other politicians may have been more cynical in their calculations. In local elections in 1999, the vast majority of provincial candidates, across all parties, promised to support a referendum. Once in office this idea was dropped.

substantial minority of Acehnese attempted to demonstrate for a referendum. An attempt to repeat the referendum rally exactly a year later sparked a massive security operation to prevent it.⁴²

Thus the year 1999 saw public anger reach new levels, and resulted in strong demands for a referendum. It stands to reason that most of those demanding a referendum on the issue of independence would most likely have voted for the independence if given the chance. Those who support Indonesian statehood tend not to favour this type of ballot at all.

Mediation

The Wahid Administration, upon assuming power in 1999, attempted to find a negotiated settlement to the problem, and in 2000 a Humanitarian Pause was implemented. Although the Indonesian president and the military chief of staff gave orders to avoid the deaths of non-combatants, during the Humanitarian Pause which took effect on 2 June 2000 and ran until 15 January 2001, nearly 800 people lost their lives. While many question if the Humanitarian Pause actually achieved anything at all, it did, however, represent the start of a dialogue process. These talks are facilitated by the Switzerland-based Henry Dunant Centre (HDC; also known as the *Centre pour le Dialogue Humanitaire*), the process in Geneva being called the “joint forum”, whilst the process in Banda Aceh is called the “joint committee”. These talks have continued but have been subject to difficulties.

Towards the end of the Wahid administration, and now under the Megawati government, there have been signs of reluctance for a negotiated settlement, especially by elements of the military. Although the Wahid administration made an honest attempt to find a political settlement to the violence, members of that administration, especially in the second cabinet, expressed their disdain for the process. Indonesia’s Defence Minister at the time, Mahfud M. D., revealed his frustration with the process in early 2001: “Look at the Free Aceh Movement. We have held talks with them twice, but they were fruitless. They still ask for independence, which the government will never allow.”⁴³ Expecting GAM to renounce their goal of independence after two meetings is extremely unrealistic, and reveals some naiveté about what to expect from such a dialogue. Mahfud also threatened to undertake stern action against the independence movement. Prominent generals have lobbied for a resumption of greater military action. The current army commander, when he was the Strategic Reserve (Kostrad) commander, Lieutenant-General Ryamizard Ryacudu, issued a further challenge to the

⁴² According to an International Crisis Group report: “Methods included shooting out the tires of cars and trucks, and shooting in the air on checkpoints and into the sea in the direction of boats bringing prospective participants. At least 41 people were killed during the two weeks preceding the rally.” International Crisis Group, “Aceh: Escalating Tension”, 7 December 2000.

⁴³ “Jakarta plans to clamp down on separatists”, *Straits Times*, 22 February 2001, A7.

civilian authorities: “The issuer of the orders should also be willing and dare to take responsibility. Let us say that Kostrad troops are deployed in Aceh and then a lot of people are killed, the soldiers should not then be quick to be blamed and dragged to the court for legal matters.”⁴⁴

Of the current administration, both Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, and TNI Chief General Endriartono Sutarto, have issued strong warnings that secessionist movements will be dealt with in future military operations. Endriartono is also on record as stating that separatist groups should end their struggles as “the country has been quite patient in dealing with them”.⁴⁵ Using the military solution, as articulated by both the Coordinating Minister and the TNI Chief, enjoys the near universal support of the parliament, with parliamentarians passing resolutions for a military campaign to bring Aceh under control. Yet differences in the administration are clearly visible. Recent plans to consider a state of emergency in the province, meaning greater military control and activity, led Minister for Foreign Affairs, Hassan Wirayuda, to state publicly that dialogue remains the best way to deal with Aceh – a view at odds with cabinet colleagues.

While the GAM movement will not shift on its push for independence, the Indonesian government will also not consider GAM’s request for foreign observers to monitor any ceasefire arrangements stemming from the dialogue. Aside from the expression of sovereignty, the Indonesian military regard international involvement as likely to wind up with Indonesian officers facing charges of war crimes in an international court.

It is also well known that the military have lost patience with the peace process – and they are on record as saying so. GAM has been accused of not taking the process seriously by sending representatives without any power in the field, while the Republic of Indonesia (RI) negotiating team has sent “proper officers”.⁴⁶ For a long time the RI team insisted that Abdullah Syafi’i, the GAM military commander, be present at the talks. Syafi’i was killed in January 2002 (as mentioned earlier) when he was traced to his secret location. The provincial governor, Abdullah Puteh, had sent a letter to Syafi’i to invite him to the peace process.⁴⁷

This event, alongside the death of another GAM official later on, was a major disruption to the dialogue, but it is not the first time the security forces have undermined the peace process. The process was also disrupted on 20 July 2001 when the security forces arrested the GAM negotiators at the Kuala

⁴⁴ Interview with *Kompas*, quoted in “Military push for attack on Aceh”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 April 2001.

⁴⁵ Tiarna Siboro, “TNI chief warns against secessionist movements”, *Jakarta Post*, 20 June 2002.

⁴⁶ Interview with Syaifuddin Gani, an Indonesian official and negotiator in the Aceh dialogue process, in Banda Aceh, July 2001.

⁴⁷ This letter, in Syafi’i’s possession, was later claimed, by GAM officials, to have contained a tracking device that led to his death. This scenario has not been fully established one way or the other, but the use of small tracking devices is a technique that was subsequently used to track Abu Sayyaf leaders in the Philippines.

Tripa Hotel in Banda Aceh. Arresting the other side in the peace negotiations is a very desperate step to take (although it was a favourite tactic of the Dutch). All of these events have reinforced GAM's distrust of the dialogue process, and they are even more distrustful of sending GAM leaders on the military's most-wanted list to the process.

The latest agreement in the dialogue occurred in Geneva on 9-10 May, when GAM agreed to regional autonomy (albeit as a starting point towards their goal of independence) and the two sides agreed to work towards the cessation of hostilities. The following day, the police killed a leading GAM spokesman in Aceh, Ayah Sofyan. The death of the GAM leader occurred when he was arrested and subsequently executed in an extra-judicial manner. (This case not only highlights the systematic undermining of negotiations but the total disregard for due process of law.) In June 2002 two members of the regional parliament were murdered, although both sides deny responsibility. The military have held GAM responsible and cited it as evidence that they are not serious about the peace process.

Economic Exploitation and Regional Autonomy

In 2001 a special autonomy deal was offered to Aceh as a province (a similar special deal has been made with Irian Jaya) in which 70 per cent of government revenues will be returned to Aceh. If done correctly, this will be an important step forward in alleviating the problem of Aceh. One of the most substantial charges levelled against Jakarta by many sections of Acehnese society is that Aceh has been subject to economic exploitation. These feelings are by no means unique to Aceh, but they have fed into wider alienation. This perceived exploitation in Aceh, although also claimed by many in the provinces of Kalimantan and Riau, has become wrapped up in secessionist claims in the restive province. Aceh produces 30-40 per cent of Indonesia's LNG production (and around 22 per cent of gas exports) and about 10 per cent of its oil, yet to date has seen little returns from these natural resources.⁴⁸ From the early 1990s Aceh was ranked as the seventh poorest province in Indonesia (out of 27 at the time) despite its resource wealth.⁴⁹ Less than five per cent of the returns went to Aceh, but there has emerged a "dual economy" or two separate economies with very little interaction between them. Development has concentrated around Lhokseumawe, but the vast majority of Acehnese largely missed the development gains of the New Order period. Throughout much of 2001, Exxon Mobil closed their operation at PT Arun, near Lhokseumawe, after threats to their gas extraction operation (in partnership with Pertamina) and concern that the war would expand. They have resumed operations in recent times. Three battalions of troops, 10 per cent of the total in Aceh, now guard the complex.

⁴⁸ Tom Wright, "Exxon-Mobil: Security Situation Improving At Aceh Gas Plant", *Dow Jones Newswires*, 18 June 2001.

⁴⁹ *Tempo Magazine*, 8 January 2001.

Under Law Number 5/1974, Aceh was given special status as a *Provinsi Daerah Istimewa* (Special Provincial Area). In theory this gave the province some authority, but in practice it meant nothing as the center could, and always did, override local initiatives. Jakarta initially tried to undercut support for the GAM by allowing Aceh in 1999 to decide on and implement aspects of Islamic law (*sharia*) that went beyond those that apply to Indonesia's Muslim population (inheritance, marriage and divorce) – although once again this failed to address the real issues of justice and poverty. In 2001 the issue of special status was revitalized. The new autonomy deal gives 70% of revenues back to Aceh and allows the provincial government to extend Syariah Law. The province itself has now been renamed “Nanggroe Aceh Darusalam.”⁵⁰ Undoubtedly the return of revenue will be popular (if any of it trickles down from the provincial administration) but the popularity of Syariah Law has never been tested by popular ballot. On this last point, again it takes the assumption that Aceh is restive because the people are agitating for Islamism, when there are other far more important factors. The issue of Islam is almost a separate issue altogether from the problems of insurgency. GAM is not overtly Islamist, except in so far as its members reflect Aceh's conservative brand of Islam (although many are also clearly nominal). A more influential body in bringing about aspects of Syariah Law has been the Council of Ulema in Aceh, a body that has renounced the independence struggle, and reserved its special venom for GAM in particular.

Prospects for the Future

Soon after taking power, President Megawati made a major speech on 17 August 2001 (Indonesia's Independence Day). During this speech she made apologies to Aceh and Papua (or Irian Jaya). Just weeks prior to taking power, Megawati had expressed the view that she would solve the Aceh problem by Independence Day 2001, causing great concern within Aceh itself. At the very least this revealed a very ‘pollyannish’ view of the situation in Aceh. Despite this there are signs of hope in the Megawati administration: the foreign minister, Hasan Wirayuda, was intimately involved in the Aceh dialogue process in 2000 and understands the Aceh problem; and the vice president, Hamzah Haz, has quietly advocated a more holistic solution to the problem (Haz's United Development Party is strong in Aceh).

On 22 August 2001, Megawati and a 28 member delegation went to Aceh on a whirlwind tour that lasted for four hours. In the aftermath of the September 11 terror attacks on the US, Megawati visited the United States. During that visit she publicly linked the threat the US faces from global terrorism, with the situation in Aceh. The potency of labeling the Aceh

⁵⁰ *Nanggroe* is an Acehnese word meaning “state” (*Negri* in Indonesian), while Darusalam is Arabic for “house of peace”. The Arabic reflects Aceh's special association with Islam and Arabia, while the use of regional vernacular in an official name is without precedent in Indonesia.

problem as one of “Islamic terrorism” has taken on a whole new exigency in the wake of September 11.⁵¹ Yet, it would be a tragic misunderstanding if Aceh were viewed through that particular prism. There is no evidence that the US administration see Aceh as part of the problem of “international terrorism”, nor has GAM been added to the US State Department’s list of international terrorist groups.

Conclusion

The problem of Aceh has two fundamental causes: massive human rights abuses under the Soeharto administration; and economic exploitation and underdevelopment. The conflict in Indonesia’s far northwest province has been widely misunderstood as being grounded solely in ethno-religious differences, or, to be precise, that rebels are fighting for an “Islamic state”. However, GAM are far from being Islamist in orientation, and are at heart a nationalist/separatist organization that wishes to restore an independent sultanate. Yet support for the independence cause should not automatically be interpreted as support for GAM – although the security forces do not appear to make such a distinction. It would seem that many, or most, Acehnese now want independence from Indonesia, but this would seem to be a more recent development than some versions of Aceh’s history have suggested.

The “shock therapy” of the military has been counter-productive in this sense. Rather than terrorizing the Acehnese back into the Republic of Indonesia, public support has been lost. Acehnese support for independence is probably best understood as a vote of no-confidence in the military rather than in the Republic of Indonesia *per se* (a republic the people of Aceh helped to found). In the reformasi era, where enormous democratic gains have been made in the body politic, the security forces have not only failed to be more professional, but their methods differ little from those employed so disastrously under the New Order regime. In fact the military has done little more than unwittingly cultivate the independence cause within a generation from a handful of supporters to a widespread cause. This is indeed a terrible irony for an institution that views itself as not only the key to Indonesian stability, but the self-appointed guardian of national unity.

⁵¹ See address by H.E. Megawati Soekarnoputri, President Republic Of Indonesia, USINDO Gala Dinner, Washington DC, 19 September 2001.