Peace and Conflict Monitor

SPECIAL REPORT
Contemporary Politics of Conflict in Aceh
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Social and political challenges continue to affect Aceh as the region struggles to achieve peace, justice, and reconciliation, both within itself and with the Indonesian government. Michael Cornish reports on the status of Aceh's democratic transition and the complicated political forces that have arisen in the fragile peace of the last decade.

Introduction

Aceh has been an independently-minded region and place of conflict for several generations. Despite the promises of significant autonomy within an independent Indonesia, 1950 saw the construction of a unitary Indonesian state and Aceh lost its quasi-autonomous status, being subsumed within the new, larger province of Northern Sumatra.[1] This sparked off a conflict between the Acehnese and the central Indonesian administration that was then to seethe violently in various forms until the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami triggered serious efforts at peace. These efforts eventually culminated in the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding[2] signed between the Indonesian Government and the armed independence movement (the 'GAM'[3]). This agreement, combined with the subsequent Law of Governing Aceh, granted Aceh significant local political, cultural, and economic powers. However, the democratic transition has not been trouble-free, and Aceh has seen the return of patronage politics – so endemic elsewhere in Indonesia – to its political landscape, along with all its attendant challenges.

Politics as usual?

After the peace, the Independent Aceh Movement Party[4] was founded by the former leaders of the independence movement[5]. A core element of the peace agreement had been that GAM members would be allowed to contest political positions in Aceh without having to adopt national party affiliations – in essence, politics has been granted legitimate space to become local. The result, as Mohammad Ansori describes, was that "*combatants re-invented themselves as politicians, administrators, businessmen and contractors.*"[6] Furthermore:

> The entry of a large number of GAM members into bureaucracy… has created a new circle of power and lucrative patronage networks in Aceh, thereby deconstructing the existing constellation of political power in the province. The newly crafted circle of power then steers economic opportunities to former GAM elites.[7]

However, these insurgency leaders-turned provincial elites also contest power between themselves, and as democracy consolidates within a transitional, post-conflict Aceh, this is to be expected. Professor Damien Kingsbury agrees:

> [The] GAM reflected a common experience with former independence movements that bring together often disparate groups of people under a common cause. Once the cause was gone, these groups gravitated to their more natural constituencies.[8]

However, the concern is that even though political power is being more or less democratically contested, it has still been captured by a political elite less interested in the development of Aceh than they are in their own self-enrichment. Ansori continues:

> [There is an] inequitable distribution of the rewards between the elites and the rank-and-file combatants in the post-Helsinki [post-Memorandum] period. Former elites appear ignorant of or unconcerned with the living condition of former rank-and-file combatants, most of whom are unemployed and living in poverty.[9]

Already under pressure from the global financial crisis, these dynamics are emerging as international funds for post-tsunami and post-conflict projects are being wound back. Already, the simple gap between development funding received by conflict-affected communities and those received by tsunami-affected communities has been a source of increasing frustrations[10]. With a glut of former-GAM militia who possess little means to secure a decent income – 20% of Acehnese are below the Indonesian poverty line[11] – a worrying cocktail of factors is developing which may incentivise violence through banditry or broader social unrest. If this were not enough, the division of spoils of political power between just the former-GAM elite is also accentuating longstanding ethnic divisions in the province.[12]

On the other hand, whilst there have been disputes between Aceh's provincial government and the central Indonesian government throughout the peace process, its implementation to date has been – remarkably – "*relatively smooth*"[13]. Even so, a major political challenge yet to be addressed is the implementation of an Acehnese Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Human Rights Court, both of which were promised in the original Memorandum. Whilst a Commission "*is not meant to open old wounds, but to fulfil the rights of victims of the conflict to truth, justice and reparations*"[14], Executive Director at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Rizal Sukma, is more concerned:

> [The Commission and Court] will prove to be contentious issues for peace-building efforts because it might serve as a source of tension in intra-community relations and between Aceh and the central government in Jakarta.[15]

The lack of economic development, whilst not purely a national responsibility, is also an issue that needs greater national attention if Acehnese politics are to remain peaceful.

Conclusion

As one would expect, the political climate in an Aceh at peace has vastly improved since it was plagued by open and violent conflict. However, the transformation to democracy has been imperfect, and is now beset with the return of traditional political challenges. Cronyism and patronage politics are complicating attempts at good governance and broad-based development, and the unfinished business of reconciliation

looms ever politically larger. As the International Crisis Group so aptly puts it:

> Sooner or later… there will have to be a reckoning: does the party [Partai Aceh], with its extensive institutional control, have the will and capacity to use its power in the interests of improved social services and poverty alleviation?[16]

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[1] p8, Damien Kingsbury, *Peace in Aceh*, 2006

[2] *Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement*, 15 August 2005

[3] Gerakan Aceh Merdeka

[4] Partai Gerakan Aceh Mandiri; technically a separate entity from GAM

[5] p32, Mohammad Hasan Ansori, 'From Insurgency to Bureaucracy: Free Aceh Movement, Aceh Party and the New Face of Conflict', *Stability: International Journal of Security & Development*, Vol. 1, #1, November 2012

[6] Ibid.

[7] p37, above n5

[8] Damien Kingsbury, 'Damien Kingsbury's Blog', *Deakin University*, 12 April 2012, , accessed 10 November 2013

[9] p37, above n5

[10] p7, Rizal Sukma, *Managing Peace in Aceh: The Challenge of Post-Conflict Peace Building*, Banda Aceh, 27 February 2007

[11] p33, above n5

[12] p39, above n5

[13] p2, above n10

[14] Nurdin Hasan, 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission Discussions Held in Aceh', *Aceh Globe*, 6 November 2013, , accessed 10 November 2013

[15] p7, above n10

[16] p12, *Indonesia: Tensions Over Aceh's Flag*, International Crisis Group, Asia Briefing N°139, 7 May 2013

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