

The political process in Aceh

a new beginning?

Aguswandi



Acehnese read local morning newspapers declaring the results of the governor election in Banda Aceh, December 2006.

Source: Reuters/Tarmizy Harva

Aceh has become the most politically dynamic space in Indonesia as a result of new political landscapes engendered by the 2005 *Memorandum of Understanding* (MoU). There is nowhere else in the country where a former rebel can compete in an election to become governor, where a former political prisoner can become director of a major agency such as the Aceh Reintegration Board (BRA), or where former insurgents and their supporters could become district heads and mayors (*bupati*). This political dynamism has transformed the context in Aceh and Indonesia at large. Initiatives driving the peace settlement in Aceh have established important precedents for contexts elsewhere in the country. Some have advocated the deployment of conflict transformation strategies used in Aceh in West Papua. The Acehnese example has also encouraged the possibility of independent candidates without party affiliation standing for – and winning – elections. It has also promoted discussion on the possibility of local political parties being established not only in Aceh, but anywhere in Indonesia.

From rebels to administrators

The peace process in Aceh received a significant boost when in 2006 Irwandi, a former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) rebel, was elected the new governor. Despite the emergence of a split within GAM's leadership, the elections encouraged the political reintegration of many former combatants into society. Irwandi's election signified the end of an old way of life, an old politics, and the beginning of new alternatives. Former GAM combatants, skilled in guerrilla warfare, now face different tests of their skills as administrators, government officials and representatives of the people.

Political realities nonetheless challenge this transformation of the rebel into the administrator. Although Irwandi has a strong, democratic mandate as the governor of Aceh, at the same time he has no experience of public office and is not supported by either a political party or the Acehnese parliament. This absence of support has resulted in significant delays, for example, in securing parliamentary approval of the provincial draft budget. Within GAM, Irwandi also continues to lack the full support of the top leadership, especially those from Malik's camp. However, this situation has improved with the progress of the overall reconciliation process within GAM.

Reform of Aceh's administrative structures and the officials who staff the apparatus is one of Governor Irwandi's imperatives. Among the many realities that officials must face in the new situation is the most difficult reality of all – their familiarity and ease with the old situation. The government apparatus in Aceh has not gone through any significant reform, turnover of

personnel or modernization; in short, the way things are done now is the way they were done before. However, there was a significant breakthrough with the highly competitive and open selection process of the heads of the *dinas* (government sector agencies). These improvements have remained isolated at the top level, however, and have as yet to filter down to lower levels.

The weak capacity of local government is even more demonstrable at some of the district (*kabupaten*) levels. The 23 districts of Aceh province, seven of which were won by former GAM members, have different capacities. In most districts the head of the administration, who in practice exercises a wide margin of autonomy from central authority at the local level, is running the *kabupaten* under a regime of 'business as usual'. The ability to absorb the peace process, to take the initiative and to implement real change as the result of the political settlement offered by the MoU is very difficult to discern at this level. This situation is compounded by the fact that governance assistance is available predominantly at provincial, not district, level, while real power is exercised predominantly at district, not provincial, level.

Former anti-separatist groups

Aceh's provincial government has also faced challenges from former anti-separatist groups established during the conflict era. Most of these groups are affiliated to an umbrella association called PETA (*Pembela Tanah Air*, 'homeland defenders'). Like former GAM members, members of groups affiliated to PETA have also received assistance from the BRA. However, there are no parallel processes of change transforming PETA into a political party or other institutionalized entity; rather, as before, PETA's constituent groups continue to pursue their collective interests. The fact that the Aceh Transitional Committee (KPA) is a very visible player catering to the needs of demobilized GAM members gives even less incentive to groups within PETA to disband and cease their existence. In the longer term both KPA and PETA have the potential to contribute to renewed conflict if the transformation of both groups is not organized properly. Many figures associated with PETA now number among the advocates of splitting the province of Aceh into new territorial units (ALA/ABAS; see below).

Splitting Aceh

A key challenge to peace in Aceh is the proposal to subdivide Aceh by creating new provinces – the so-called ALA/ABAS provinces. Proponents of the change are mainly composed of elites from the highlands of Aceh – Central Aceh, South East Aceh and Benar Meriah. In 2005 while government representatives and GAM leaders met in Helsinki to labour on the peace agreement, these elites met in Jakarta to strengthen

their demands for a new province called Aceh Leuser Antara (ALA). They have recently continued to promote the idea in the Indonesian parliament through the nationalist Democratic Party of Indonesia.

These demands are rooted in the perception that the current process is neither politically nor economically in their favour. The MoU defined Aceh's borders as those determined in July 1950, which include the central highlands as part of Aceh's territory. The government's reintegration program, while allocated huge amounts of money for economically empowering former GAM combatants through the BRA fund, is not accessible to them. This has fuelled anger, resentment and even the accusation that the government is discriminating against its "own true sons and daughters of the Republic".

To be fair, some of their arguments about the underdevelopment of the central highlands are partly true. Although the central highlands and west coast of Aceh are places abundantly rich in natural resources, as yet they produce very little. Yet this is not sufficient cause for further territorial adjustment. An effective strategy for meeting demands for development in the central highlands in ways compatible with the broader prosperity and peace of Aceh as a whole is urgently needed.

Political parties

The future of Aceh and its celebrated peace process are integrally linked to the process of GAM's transformation from an armed group into a political movement. In May 2008 GAM, together with 11 local political parties, was legalized as a formal political party that can compete in local elections. The decision to establish a political party shows that former GAM members have the aspiration and intention to participate in a normalized, democratic political process. This is a significant gauge of improvement and the implementation of the MoU.

Aceh nonetheless still faces the challenge of discussing substantive issues. GAM and other local political parties must rise to the challenge of talking about the economy, education, governance and a range of other things crucial to the future of Aceh and Acehnese society. They have also to compete with ideas from other political parties and civil society groups and to convince others of their own ideas in political debate. Overall this is the best scenario for the conflict transformation in Aceh. The 2009 election will be the first opportunity for this sort of constructive competition between both national and local political parties. Some early polls have suggested that local political parties will be popular. While this may be the case, popularity will only be sustained if political parties are able to address the populace with effective platforms for development.