Aceh’s new era

an interview with Irwandi Yusuf

Irwandi Yusuf drops his ballot in a polling station in Banda Aceh, December 2006.

Source: Reuters/Tarmizy Henna

Irwandi Yusuf is the Governor of Aceh. A former commander in the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), he was imprisoned in 2003 but escaped when the Keudah Prison was destroyed by the tsunami of December 2004. He subsequently participated in the Helsinki peace negotiations.

Irwandi Yusuf: The peace process started before the December 2004 tsunami but the tsunami speeded it to a conclusion. Previously, messengers from Jakarta visited me in prison seeking negotiations with the GAM in exile. I told them, no way – you must bring a guarantor to guarantee that an agreement would be implemented. GAM still didn’t trust the Indonesian government. But after the tsunami, both sides became much more understanding. There was some resistance to talks from the Indonesian military because they still wanted to prove they were able to crush the movement. But in fact GAM’s military was regaining strength while the government troops were starting to lose their morale. Had there been no tsunami, the war would have got even bloodier and I don’t know what the outcome would have been.

What has the peace agreement achieved?

The peace accord achieved peace. After two and a half years Aceh is still peaceful and I hope it’s going to be eternally peaceful. Beyond that, Aceh has been opened up, which is almost unprecedented in recent history. Especially under martial law, Aceh was a closed door which you could only sometimes peep through. The tsunami held the key to the openness of Aceh, empowered by the Helsinki talks.

During the conflict, the people of Aceh and the government community were poles apart. The people were alienated from the local and central governments – both were seen as belonging to Jakarta. Now there is a reintegration – not among the people of Aceh but between them and the government community. It has helped that I’m now part of government, because I’m from the other side – the people’s side. By developing trust between the government and people, we are now trying to boost our economy and attract investors.

Are you satisfied with progress in implementing the peace agreement?

We cannot say we are satisfied because there are so many items not yet even touched. Aceh now has its autonomy law, the Law on the Governing of Aceh (LoGA). But in order to implement this law we need six or seven regulations or bylaws from the central government, and so far only one has been produced. We particularly need the Presidential Regulation on Consultation and Consensus, which is about how the central government consults the Aceh government when producing other bylaws. Without this regulation, we don’t know how to proceed.

Beyond that, we need the human rights court, even though the LoGA says it is only for human rights violations taking place after the promulgation of the
law. We also haven’t seen the truth and reconciliation mechanism yet, nor the joint claims settlement commission required by the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). We need these in the immediate future – or at least straight after the 2009 election if it is too difficult to get done now.

You were the GAM representative with the AMM: do you think they did a good job in Aceh?

In terms of keeping the peace, yes, an excellent job. But in terms of monitoring the interpretation of the MoU in law, they did a less satisfactory job. They abandoned Aceh too soon, while we were still struggling to get the laws. Everyone can see that the LoGA is not compatible with the MoU. It gives with one hand and takes away with the other. Now we feel the difficulty when we come to implement this law, because of conflicting articles and missing bylaws.

As the first governor elected after the peace agreement, the hopes and expectations of the people must be extremely high. Do you feel the need to manage these expectations?

Yes, they are too high. I think this is a symptom in all the ex-conflict zones in the world, especially when the new leader comes from the side of the people. They expect everything from him – you’ve got to change this, you’ve got to change that, you’ve got to give us prosperity in a very short period of time. I think even God would be afraid of that! Or a little worried!

The peace agreement was a great achievement, but people sometimes can’t feel the peace, or they forget to feel it – like a man looking for a lost horse while he is riding on it. Of course, everyone feels an empty stomach, and an empty stomach makes the mouth gag, and the gagging mouth can spell out many things, some dirty. So I need to fill the empty stomach step by step. We are focusing on the rural areas, community forestry and agribusiness, which doesn’t depend on highly developed infrastructure. God has bestowed upon us rich forests and agricultural land, but development is not going to be accomplished within two weeks.

If you could go back to Helsinki, what things that you didn’t ask for would you ask for? For example, do you wish the police were under Aceh’s administration?

We demanded that police in Aceh be regulated by the governor, but the central government would not agree and we couldn’t gain support from the international community on this. We had to justify which goals we could achieve at the talks, and which ones we could not. So we took the middle way. The Aceh governor has the right to approve the chief of police and prosecutors, but they remain in the vertical structure of central government as policing falls under one of the six areas of authority stipulated as coming under central government, in this case ‘national security.’

What else would we adjust with the MoU if we could go back in time? On the issue of hydrocarbon mining, the MoU only stipulates that Aceh retains 70 per cent of the hydrocarbon resource revenues, but it doesn’t mention who will regulate and govern this, or who has the authority to give licences for new exploitation. The LoGA says only that the central and Aceh governments will manage these resources jointly. We should have made it right in the MoU.

What are the necessary steps to make peace sustainable and is there a role for the international community?

The peace in Aceh was not generated only by the Indonesian authorities and GAM; it was also generated by the international community, who have obligations to watch and to warn the parties when they see symptoms of pathologies in the peace process. Countries with a stake in the peace process should use their diplomatic relations with Indonesia to advise or censure the government and the leaders of GAM.

Having our own local political party or parties, as stipulated by the MoU, will hopefully strengthen peaceful discussion in Aceh. In 2009, we will have our own parliament based on local and national parties, and this is expected to generate a new era of peaceful and democratic politics.

So do you think GAM will have one political party?

Yes. I do hope the troubles with central government on this issue can be overcome. GAM has done everything Jakarta requested – changing the symbol and so forth. I don’t think there are new reasons for Jakarta to reject this party. I hope Jakarta will also understand that a peaceful solution in Aceh has been achieved in a dignified way. GAM wasn’t a loser in the war. The government wasn’t a loser. So I don’t want one side to treat the other like the loser.

Could the national elections in 2009 pose a threat to the peace process?

I am afraid that if ultra-nationalists win, they would not respect the peace in Aceh. But the current President and the Vice-President are very committed people and I thank them for that. Of course, there are many people in the government so they cannot control everything. It is not enough that only they understand the Aceh case. We find Jakarta officials who understand the LoGA are easy to deal with, but those who do not are very difficult. Jakarta must now do more to socialize the Aceh case within the government community.