The pre-colonial past and resistance to colonial rule

Regional records document a Buddhist, rice-growing society in the area covered today by Aceh in 500 C.E. By medieval times Aceh had become a nexus for trade routes from Malay kingdoms, Africa, India, China, Arabia and Europe. Between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries waves of Middle Eastern and Gujarati traders spread Islam to the area now known as Aceh, which became a gateway for Islam to disseminate to the wider archipelago. By the end of the thirteenth century kings, referring to themselves as sultans and maliks, were consolidating power bases in port-states along the coast of Aceh.

It was only in the early sixteenth century that Aceh was united, coinciding with and partly triggered by the arrival of Portuguese traders and adventurers in the region. By the early seventeenth century successive sultans had consolidated Aceh into a regional maritime power controlling the Straits of Malacca. During this ‘golden age’, Aceh was one of the richest and militarily most powerful indigenous states in Southeast Asia.

However, warfare, rivals for trade and internal dissent took their toll and over time Aceh lost its influence. At the same time, European powers began to consolidate their authority in the region. In 1641 the Dutch capture Malacca from the Portuguese; British influence also rises following the establishment of a base at Penang in 1786 and the founding of Singapore in 1819. In the early nineteenth century Aceh becomes a focal point for Anglo-Dutch rivalry. The 1824 London Treaty between Britain and the Netherlands provided for Acehnese sovereignty; however, the 1871 Sumatra Treaty allowed Dutch involvement in Acehnese commerce. The Dutch invade Aceh in 1876, beginning a 30-year war characterized by the fiercest local resistance to Dutch colonial rule in the region. Although the Dutch capture the last Acehnese sultan in 1903, sporadic and small-scale resistance continues until the Japanese invasion.

Indonesian independence

In 1942 Japanese forces bring an end to Dutch rule of the (then) Dutch East Indies. In 1945, following the Japanese surrender, the Republic of Indonesia proclaims independence; Dutch sovereignty is transferred to Indonesia in December 1949. During the years of armed struggle (1945-49), the Acehnese were among the strongest supporters of Indonesian independence; indeed, mainland Aceh was the one part of the Indies which the Dutch did not even attempt to re-conquer. Shortly after independence,
however, Aceh was merged into the province of North Sumatra. A perception that Aceh was being treated inequitably, as well as disagreements over the place of Islamic law, gave rise to widespread disillusionment in Aceh with the new Indonesian state.

In 1953, many Acehnese supported the Darul Islam (‘House of Islam’) rebellion, originating in the major island of Java and led in Aceh by Daud Bereueh, a religious leader and ousted governor of the province. The rebellion aimed to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia (Negara Islam Indonesia, NII), but was eventually put down, and in 1959 the Indonesian government gave Aceh ‘special territory’ (Daerah Istimewa) status. This ostensibly granted autonomy in religious, cultural and educational matters. Aceh’s nationalist political leaders continually presented a challenge to Jakarta’s centralizing Indonesian nation-building project under President Sukarno (1945-67) and active resistance to the highly centralised development ideology of President Suharto (1966-98).

Under the authoritarian and military-based regime of President Suharto Acehnese grievances once again began to mount. Special territory status came to be seen as increasingly meaningless in the face of the centralizing tendencies of the government in Jakarta, reflected in the latter’s over-ruling of attempts to implement local laws in various fields, including Islamic law. Industrial development, following the discovery of major natural gas reserves in northern Aceh in 1971, prompted the migration of substantial numbers of non-indigenous workers to the territory and was experienced by many local people as disruptive and exploitative. In the 1970s only a tiny proportion of the revenue from the Lhokseumawe Industrial Zone filtered back to the local government.

1976
Hasan di Tiro and a group of youths and former Darul Islam fighters form the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) on 4 December and declare Acehnese independence. Many GAM members are arrested and some of the movement’s leaders are killed by Indonesian government efforts to repress the movement. Counter-insurgency operations begin in 1977.

1979

1989
GAM re-launches guerrilla operations against the Indonesian military (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, TNI) and other targets. This prompts President Suharto to impose a Military Operation Area (DOM) in Aceh.

1990-1991
Intense counter-insurgency measures drive much of GAM’s leadership abroad. Official records and human rights groups put the death toll in the region at least 1000, with a similar number of disappearances and thousands of others injured, widowed or orphaned.

1998
In May President Suharto is forced to resign in favour of Vice-President Habibie, who initiates democratic reforms, ends restrictions on free media and lifts Aceh’s designation as a Military Operation Area. TNI chief General Wiranto issues a public apology on 7 August following the exposure of human rights violations in Aceh.

1999
President Habibie announces in January that East Timor will be granted the right to hold a referendum including an option for independence. In February a meeting of student and youth activists formulates a campaign for a referendum in Aceh. They form the Aceh Referendum Information Centre (Sentral Informasi Referendum, SIRA) to coordinate their campaign. In March President Habibie visits Aceh and apologizes for atrocities committed by the military under his predecessor. His government introduces a Regional Autonomy Law in May. Indonesian human rights activists take up the cause of atrocities committed under the DOM, opening a process of documenting human rights violations engaging Acehnese civil society too. Nonetheless violence intensifies. Well-publicized massacres of civilians by security forces in North and Central Aceh take place in May and July. On 30 August the population of East Timor votes overwhelmingly in favour of independence in a referendum.

October
Abdurrahman Wahid becomes President of Indonesia. On 4 October Law 44/1999 on the Realization of the Special Status of the Province of Aceh is enacted; among other items the law provides for the introduction of Shariah law and education, the enactment of customary law (adat) and the creation of a board of religious leaders.

November
The student movement in Aceh gathers momentum. Mass demonstrations in Aceh and Jakarta call for a referendum on self-determination in Aceh.

Chronology
2000
Between January and May the Henry Dunant Centre (HDC) of Geneva brokers talks between the Indonesian government and GAM representatives in Geneva.

March
Indonesian Secretary of State Bondan Gunawan meets informally with the head of GAM’s military wing, Abdullah Syafie, in Aceh. It is the first high-level meeting between GAM and an Indonesian government official.

May
On 12 May the Joint Understanding on a Humanitarian Pause for Aceh is signed. The Pause begins in June, but levels of violence remain significant through the end of the year.

2001
January
HDC arranges another meeting for both parties in Geneva. As the Humanitarian Pause reaches its expiry date of 15 January, ‘sweeping operations’ are resumed by the TNI in Aceh. Civil society representatives call for a ceasefire.

March
ExxonMobil temporarily closes its gas extraction facility at Lhokseumawe in response to the worsening security situation.

April
Under pressure from the military to declare a state of emergency President Wahid issues Presidential Instruction No.4 with a six-point plan to resolve the conflict, including by allowing more security operations.

June
Eleven Indonesian citizens open litigation proceedings against ExxonMobil at the United States Supreme Court for alleged human rights abuses perpetrated by security personnel hired by ExxonMobil from the Indonesian military.

July-August
President Wahid is removed from power and Megawati Sukarnoputri (the daughter of former President Sukarno) takes up the presidency. On 8 August President Megawati signs a Law 18/2001 on Special Autonomy for the province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (NAD, the title of Aceh province according to the law). This law contains more far-reaching provisions than the 1999 Regional Autonomy Law, including the right of the province to retain a larger share of natural resource revenues than other provinces and the right to implement aspects of Shar‘ia law.

2002
In January the Indonesian military raids GAM headquarters and kills GAM commander Abdullah Syafie. In February Geneva talks mediated by the HDC resume, culminating in an agreement in May on the structure of future dialogue and negotiation mechanisms; government sources announce, wrongly, that GAM had accepted autonomy. Counter-insurgency operations intensify.

August
The government gives GAM three months to cease armed resistance and accept autonomy.

December
A Preparatory Conference on Peace and Reconstruction in Aceh meets in Tokyo, co-chaired by Japan, the United States, the European Union and the World Bank, and establishes a set of priorities for post-conflict reconstruction. On 9 December the government and GAM sign the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (CoHA) in a meeting brokered by the HDC. Under the CoHA, the Indonesian military agrees to move from offensive to defensive positions and in designated ‘peace zones’ GAM members agree to put their weapons into storage. The Joint Security Committee (JSC) is formed to monitor the peace process, comprising representatives of both parties and independent monitors from Thailand and the Philippines. Levels of violence drop significantly in the aftermath of the agreement.

2003
January-February
The five-month CoHA implementation phase begins: the first peace zones are established and monitors deployed.

March-April
Violence escalates. Talks between the Indonesian government and GAM break down on 24 April. President Megawati accuses GAM of failing to disarm and orders the military to prepare for a new counter-insurgency offensive in Aceh. On 28 April the government gives a two-week ultimatum to GAM to end resistance and accept autonomy within a unitary Indonesia. GAM refuses to do so. Militia attacks on international monitors prompt their withdrawal.

May
The US, Japan and the European Union urge the Indonesian government and GAM to avoid armed clashes and extend peace talks in Tokyo. On 16 May the Indonesian government reiterates that special autonomy is its final offer and threatens GAM with a renewed military offensive. GAM negotiators do not respond, citing arrests of GAM members en route to Tokyo as the reason. On 19 May President Megawati
imposes a six-month ‘military emergency’ in Aceh in which the military is given greatly expanded powers to pursue counter-insurgency operations and to supervise civilian affairs. An estimated 30,000 soldiers and 12,000 police officers are deployed to Aceh and an Indonesian military offensive (referred to as Operasi Terpadu) commences, representing Indonesia’s biggest military operation since the deployment in East Timor in 1975 and ultimately seriously weakening GAM’s military capacity. Operasi Terpadu is accompanied by background screening of civil servants in Aceh, the obligatory distribution of new identity cards for all residents of Aceh and forced participation in oaths of loyalty to the Indonesian state.

**November**
Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono confirms that martial law is extended.

**2004**

**May**
Martial law is replaced by a state of ‘civil emergency’, although troop levels of 40,000 remain in Aceh. The highest security command is transferred from the army to the police.

**September**
Former General and Security Minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is elected President of Indonesia on a ticket with his deputy Yusuf Kalla as Vice-President. Yudhoyono visits Aceh in November, with pledges of amnesty, economic aid and provincial autonomy. However, the ‘civil emergency’ remains in place.

**December**
On 26 December a 9.1-magnitude underwater earthquake and ensuing tsunami devastates Aceh, killing at least 160,000 in Aceh and causing massive destruction to coastal areas and the capital Banda Aceh. In the aftermath of the tsunami Aceh is opened up to foreign aid workers; GAM declares a unilateral ceasefire.

**2005**

**January**
On 19 January Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda announces that the government will resume talks with GAM to fully restore security and political stability in the tsunami-stricken province. On 27-29 January the government and GAM meet again for the first time since May 2003 in Helsinki, at talks brokered by the Finland- and Brussels-based Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), headed by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari.

**February**
At the second round of talks in Helsinki (21-23 February) GAM accepts ‘self-government’ within Indonesia as opposed to the discredited autonomy previously offered. GAM spokespeople confirm that their long-standing goal of independence is no longer ‘on the table’.

**April**
The third round of the Helsinki talks takes place 12-16 April.

**May**
The fourth round of the Helsinki talks takes place 26-31 May. The state of emergency is lifted in Aceh and civilian authority restored. Nonetheless some 39,000 Indonesian troops remain.

**July**
The fifth and final round of the Helsinki talks takes place 12-17 July. On 17 July the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is agreed in Helsinki, with terms including the withdrawal by Indonesian government of all ‘non-organic’ troops (reinforcements sent from outside Aceh) and demobilization by GAM along with the decommissioning of weapons.

**August**
The MoU is signed formally in Helsinki on 15 August. The Indonesian government immediately grants an amnesty to GAM members and the release of GAM prisoners proceeds immediately.

**September**
The European Union-led Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) begins its work on the basis of an extendable six-monthly mandate. The decommissioning of GAM weapons and withdrawal of ‘non-organic’ security forces from Aceh proceeds successfully. Between September and December extensive consultations take place in Aceh on a draft law on self-government in Aceh.

**October**
GAM creates a new National Assembly (Majelis Nasional) in Banda Aceh, as its supreme political authority, and the Aceh Transition Committee (KPA) to supervise the demobilization of combatants.

**December**
On 4 December, supporters of the creation of two new provinces in Aceh demonstrate in Jakarta. A draft Law on the Governing of Aceh (LoGA), replacing the 2001 special autonomy law, is submitted to Jakarta on 5 December; many in Aceh perceive the draft law as having been ‘diluted’.
2006

January
The Ministry of Home Affairs submits a reworked draft Law on the Governing of Aceh to the state secretariat; the draft is widely perceived as weakening the powers envisaged for Aceh vis-à-vis the central government. Another disputed issue is whether independent candidates would be able to run in Aceh elections.

February
On 11 February the Aceh Reintegration Board (BRA) is created, mandated to manage the reintegration of former GAM members and combatants. On 17 February an office of SIRA, the Aceh Referendum Information Centre is attacked by ex-militia members.

March
The first six-month phase of the AMM ends; a three-month extension with a reduced number of monitors is agreed.

May
At a Congress held on 22-23 May GAM decides, amidst bitter and growing factionalism, not to contest local elections as an organization but to allow its members to run as independent candidates. This decision reflects the onset of an internal rift within the GAM leadership.

December
On 11 December simultaneous provincial and district elections take place in Aceh. Former GAM member Irwandi Yusuf wins the governorship with 38 per cent of the vote (his nearest rival wins 17 per cent), a vote representing a GAM victory. The second place ticket was supported by a national party, the United Development Party (PPP) and a rival group in GAM. Simultaneously GAM-affiliated candidates win in six of 19 municipality and district elections (in delayed elections over succeeding months they pick up three more districts).

The AMM completes its mandate of monitoring and supporting the peace process.

April
Governor Irwandi appoints former member of GAM’s negotiation team in Helsinki, Nur Djuli, as director of the BRA.

June
In a local by-election GAM wins the key east littoral district of Breuen with 60.2 per cent of the vote.

August
Hundreds of Indonesian flags are torn down in East Aceh; although the identity of the perpetrators remains unclear in Jakarta this is perceived as a re-emergence of separatism. On the second anniversary of the signing of the MoU a group of GAM figures write to President Yudhoyono, the EU and CMI expressing concern over the non-implementation of the MoU’s terms.

November
In district elections in South Aceh the winner is another GAM-nominated candidate.

2008

April
In the worst violent incident since the MoU, a KPA office is attacked by a mob in Alu Lintang, Central Aceh. Six people, including members of the KPA, are murdered. The incident was triggered by a dispute over control of a local bus station between GAM and former pro-government militia members.

May
Twelve local political parties, including parties comprising former GAM members, are formally amalgamated and legalized as a single party, enabling Aceh’s local parties to compete in the parliamentary election in 2009.