

The conflict in Aceh

context, precursors and catalysts

Michelle Ann Miller

Michelle Ann Miller is a postdoctoral fellow at the Asia Research Institute, at the National University of Singapore. She is the author of *Rebellion and Reform in Indonesia*.

There are diverging accounts of the primary causes of Aceh's contemporary conflict. This article charts causal factors and antecedents to the contemporary conflict during the colonial period of Acehese history and the early decades of independence, before considering the immediate causes mediating the emergence of Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in the 1970s. Finally the processes unleashed by Aceh's transformation into a 'Military Operations Area' (DOM) and the subsequent democratic breakthrough of 1998 are considered in terms of how the context for addressing the conflict in Aceh was transformed.

Legacies of colonialism

The narrative of colonial domination has been central to the interpretation of the conflict promoted by GAM, widely accepted in Aceh but rejected by most other Indonesian and foreign sources. In GAM's view the conflict stemmed from the 1873 Dutch invasion of the 'State of Aceh-Sumatra', and was perpetuated by the 'illegal transfer of sovereignty' in 1949 from the 'old, Dutch colonialists to the new, Javanese colonialists.' GAM justified its claim to territorial sovereignty through the construct of a singular Acehese national identity based on ethnicity, language, culture, history and geography.

This narrative of outsiders' repeated attempts at subjugation of a singular Acehese nation is debatable. It is true that a distinctive Acehese identity linked to sovereign statehood had existed for four centuries prior to Aceh's incorporation into Indonesia. Aceh's strategic location along the Malacca Straits trading route also led to the development of a Malay-Islamic written and cultural tradition, setting the Acehese apart from many other ethnic groups in the archipelago closer geographically to the island of Java. However, even at its pre-colonial zenith the state of Aceh sequestered a number of smaller states whose indigenous ethnic groups never completely assimilated into Aceh. Almost 20 per cent of Aceh's population is not ethnically



Acehnese, claiming membership of at least seven linguistically and culturally distinct indigenous ethnic minority groups (Gayo, Alas, Kluet, Aneuk Jamee, Tamiang, Singkil and Puloe) and non-indigenous ethnic minorities (the largest comprising Javanese settlers). GAM's argument about Aceh's illegal incorporation into Indonesia is also refuted by the weight of historical evidence that the contribution of the Acehnese to the Indonesian nationalist struggle was wholly voluntary, both in terms of human and economic resources (including the Acehnese' famous purchase of the first aeroplanes for the new Republic). Nevertheless, of the whole archipelago the Dutch confronted the most tenacious resistance to colonial rule in Aceh, resistance that was never completely quelled. As one Dutch colonial governor famously put it, the defiant spirit of Acehnese resistance against outside rule was nurtured by 'a fanatical love of freedom, reinforced by a powerful sense of race, with a consequent contempt for foreigners and hatred for the infidel intruder.'

Precursors in the 1950s and 1960s

While most sources acknowledge the historical 'difference' of the Acehnese people, there is general consensus that the activities of the Indonesian state were the primary cause of the contemporary conflict. Even GAM agreed that Acehnese resentment towards the Indonesian state was aggravated by the latter's exploitation of Aceh's natural resources, broken promises about the province's 'special region' status, and depredations committed against Acehnese civilians during military operations. As the site of lucrative oil and gas assets, Aceh's resource wealth influenced Jakarta's decision to deploy large numbers of security forces to the province, whose aggressive

response to perceived security threats produced thousands of civilian casualties.

The roots of the contemporary conflict can be traced back to the Darul Islam (House of Islam) rebellion, which began in 1948 in West Java and spread across the archipelago, reaching Aceh in 1953. The rebellion loosely integrated disparate agendas to form a federation of Islamic states (*Negara Islam Indonesia*, NII). Aceh's agreement to membership of the new Indonesian state in 1949 was locally understood as being contingent on equitable treatment reflecting Aceh's contribution to the anti-colonial struggle and the upholding of Islamic principles. However, Aceh enjoyed less than one year of broad autonomy before incorporation into the province of North Sumatra as part of Jakarta's administrative reorganization of the country into just 10 provinces. The strong sense of betrayal over this decision in Aceh was exacerbated by the subsequent influx of non-Acehnese, non-Muslim migrant workers and military troops into the region, as well as deteriorating socio-economic conditions as a greater portion of the national budget began to be allocated to Java than to the outer islands.

Acehnese resentment erupted into insurgency in September 1953 when local rebels led by Aceh's most prominent Islamic religious leader (*ulama*), Teungku M. Daud Beureueh, joined the wider Darul Islam rebellion. It was only after January 1957, when President Sukarno's government reestablished the 'Province of Aceh', which raised hopes amongst some Darul Islam leaders that Aceh would soon be free to implement Shari'ah, that Acehnese involvement in the Darul Islam rebellion gradually subsided.

As part of Jakarta's efforts to reach a negotiated settlement with the Acehese Darul Islam rebels, President Sukarno also offered Aceh in principle 'special region' (*Daerah Istimewa*) status on 26 May 1959 by conferring broad autonomy to the province in the fields of religion, education and customary law (*adat*). This offer responded to an earlier autonomy proposal by the former Chief-of-Staff of the Darul Islam army, Hasan Saleh, which was rooted in the pragmatic realization that the only way to win concessions for Aceh was through a regional approach to the rebellion's broader Islamic goals. Though earlier autonomy demands by the Darul Islam rebels had been broadly federalist in nature, Jakarta considered an Islamic federation (NII) to be tantamount to returning to the discredited Dutch colonial system, a counter-federalist argument that would resurface in debates on decentralization in the post-Suharto era.

Although Daud Beureueh continued to wage his struggle from the mountains, by the early 1960s the Darul Islam movement in Aceh had been seriously weakened by a combination of internal factionalism, defections and Indonesian counterinsurgency operations. By September 1961, Beureueh was forced to modify his earlier demand for the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia to the 'implementation of Islamic law in Aceh, in particular, and Indonesia, in general.' Responding to Beureueh's compromised military capacity and softer rhetorical stance, Jakarta reopened negotiations with the rebels. In early 1962, these talks culminated in a peaceful settlement in which Jakarta allowed Aceh to start enforcing Islamic law for Muslims within its borders.

The New Order, centralization and rebellion in the 1970s

After more than a decade of relatively peaceful centre-periphery relations, Acehese discontent resurfaced in the early 1970s. The centralizing policies and practices of Suharto's New Order did not fulfill Acehese expectations of the restoration of Islam as a dominant sociopolitical force. As Acehese *ulama* became increasingly politically marginalized by the New Order's 'secular' nationalist policies, so too did their calls to implement the *Daerah Istimewa* formula. Provisions to create institutions to promote and enforce Islamic law failed to materialize and the jurisdiction of Islamic courts became increasingly restricted under the New Order. By 1974, when the New Order issued Law No.5/1974 on 'The Principles of Regional Government Administration', Aceh's *Daerah Istimewa* formula had been completely stripped of meaning. This law further increased Jakarta's grip over regional administrations by establishing presidential control over gubernatorial appointments and gubernatorial responsibility for managing provincial government.

The New Order's centralized rule was solidified through the reorganization of Acehese society. Reflecting its dual priorities of national stability and economic development, the regime nurtured two key groups in Aceh. First, the armed forces became permanently embedded in the province to defend national economic interests, to prevent the emergence of opposition forces, and to monitor and control those 'legitimate' political parties that had helped to elevate Suharto to power. Second, Suharto fostered the growth of a class of indigenous Acehese technocrats to implement national development directives and counteract the influence of the *ulama*. This bureaucratic elite tended to be highly conscious of their distinctive Acehese identity and sought to elevate Aceh's position within the Indonesian state by generating regional development.

Acehese discontent was also fuelled by the 1971 discovery of vast oil and natural gas reserves in North Aceh and the subsequent growth of the Lhokseumawe Industrial Zone (*Zona Industri Lhokseumawe*, ZILS). Most of the profits were siphoned out of Aceh, with the result that development under the New Order produced few substantive improvements to the local economy. Although parts of Java and eastern Indonesia experienced higher poverty levels than Aceh during the New Order, the expansion of ZILS compounded regional anger as villagers were forced to resettle outside the industrial zone and large numbers of skilled non-Acehese, non-Muslim workers were introduced to operate the oil and gas companies. Lucrative assets in North Aceh also attracted thousands of Indonesian security forces personnel, whose depredations against the civilian population hardened local attitudes against Indonesian authority.

It was within this context of growing regional discontent that Aceh's first separatist insurgency was born. On 4 December 1976, Tengku Hasan Muhammad di Tiro, a successful businessman and self-appointed Darul Islam 'ambassador' to the UN in New York, returned to Aceh to launch the Aceh-Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF, also called GAM). The ASNLF/GAM shared some common grievances with the Darul Islam rebels. Like Daud Beureueh, Hasan di Tiro had previously promoted a federal state of Aceh within an Islamic Indonesian Republic and only pursued the extreme option of armed separatism after the *Daerah Istimewa* formula produced no fundamental change to the relationship between Aceh and Jakarta. However, unlike the Darul Islam rebels who sought to change the form of the Indonesian state but not to secede from it, the ASNLF/GAM 're-declared' the 'free and independent Sovereign State' of 'Aceh-Sumatra' with the intent of severing all ties with the 'foreign regime of Jakarta and the alien people of the island of Java.' Also in contrast

to the earlier generation of Darul Islam rebels, GAM's demands were not religious and were explicitly nationalist in nature. Though virtually all GAM rebels were Muslim, they based their claims to territorial sovereignty on the construct of a distinctive ethnic, cultural, historical and geographically specific identity and never sought to establish ties with Islamic movements in Indonesia or elsewhere.

The different responses by Jakarta to the Darul Islam and GAM insurgencies reflected the varying objectives of the two uprisings, as well as the changing character of the central government from Sukarno's so-called 'Old Order' to President Suharto's New Order. Whereas Sukarno had relied on a combination of military force and negotiations to contain the Darul Islam rebellion in Aceh, Suharto's New Order demonstrated its intolerance of separatism by relying primarily on military force. By the late 1970s the rebels had been forced underground and only resurfaced as a cohesive fighting force after 1986. In large part, GAM's resurgence was made possible by Hasan di Tiro's ability to secure support for GAM from Libyan dictator Colonel Muammar al-Gaddafi. GAM's growth was also made possible by continued central government neglect and interference.

In 1989, Jakarta forcefully responded to the expansion of GAM by launching a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign against the Acehese rebels. Aceh was officially transformed into a 'Military Operations Area' (*Daerah Operasi Militer*, DOM), widely understood as the imposition of martial law, for the next decade. It is unclear how many Indonesian troops were stationed in Aceh during DOM as no official figures were released, but most sources estimate that about 12,000 security forces personnel were involved. The number of conflict-related deaths from the DOM period is also disputed, and the more time passes the less likely it is ever to be clarified. A 1998 Indonesian National Human Rights Commission (Komnas HAM) investigation into the atrocities committed against civilians during DOM produced contradictory findings that while 944 Acehese were killed or disappeared during DOM, some 3000 women were widowed and 15,000 to 20,000 Acehese children were orphaned. Since most sources do not distinguish between 'victims of violence' and 'fatalities', even relatively uncontroversial estimates of DOM-era fatalities tend to fall within the broad range of 1600 to 6000 deaths. What did become clear when DOM ended was that the human rights violations that accompanied these operations had further alienated Acehese society from Indonesian rule and created ripe conditions for the regeneration of GAM in the post-Suharto era. By mid-1998 Acehese antipathy towards Jakarta had become deeply entrenched and manifested itself in widespread

demands for retribution, compensation and social justice. It was Suharto's appointed successor, B. J. Habibie, who formally 'lifted' DOM in August 1998 and withdrew thousands of security personnel from Aceh.

Democratic breakthrough – a catalyst for peace?

By mid-1998, Indonesia had also initiated a process of democratization after four decades of authoritarian rule. Regime change was precipitated by the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, and its especially severe impact in Indonesia, where rising unemployment and poverty levels and soaring food prices translated into a sharp increase in crime and general socio-economic unrest across the archipelago. The social impact of the economic meltdown in Aceh, along with the island of Java, East and West Kalimantan and parts of Sumatra and eastern Indonesia, was particularly profound. This sociopolitical and economic instability in turn saw a sharp reduction in Indonesian state power and authority. In Aceh, some centrifugal forces seized this opportunity to pressure Jakarta into providing redress for their long-standing grievances, while others began to look towards the creation of an independent polity in which they would be free to govern themselves without fear of state repression and with control over their own natural resources and livelihoods.

The ushering in of a new *reformasi* era in Indonesian politics included new initiatives to deal with the country's internal conflicts. Most political leaders in Jakarta saw the decentralization of central state power as the most democratic way of containing centrifugal forces and were prepared to acknowledge a 'special' place for Indonesia's troubled provinces within the unitary state. However, the decision by President Habibie to settle the territorial dispute in East Timor by granting that province a referendum on self-determination was seen by many Indonesians as unacceptable and contributed to his political defeat in the 1999 presidential election. For Indonesian nationalists, any governmental efforts to contain the spectre of armed separatism had to strengthen Indonesia's territorial integrity and national cohesiveness, not weaken or destroy it. The view that contemporary Acehese nationalism was primarily a reaction to the New Order's counterproductive policies did not, according to this logic, require a substantive rethinking of Aceh's position within Indonesia. Instead, the prevailing belief in Jakarta was that since the 'Aceh problem' had stemmed directly from the excesses of authoritarian rule, it could gradually be redressed through the democratic accommodation of the Acehese people within a decentralized state system.