
Aceh: Conflict Development after the Helsinki Agreement

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Abstract

Purpose – This study discusses the anatomical changes in the pattern of conflicts after the peace agreement and reviews Aceh's current political situation, focusing on the terrorism issues and post-conflict local elections, the process and development of the conflict, the compromise, and the forecast for the political and administrative system of local government in Aceh.

Design/Methodology/Approach – The data were obtained by reviewing issues on terrorism and conflicts, analyzing relevant written documents, and interviewing reliable resources.

Findings – Aceh remained stable after the peace agreement between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or GAM), which was signed in Helsinki on August 15, 2005. However, it does not mean that conflicts never happened. Some conflicts that were potential threats to peace in Aceh occurred many times, ranging from crime problems to social, political, and terrorism issues. Although such conflicts also happened in other places in Indonesia, they were considered very sensitive in Aceh, which always had been associated with peace threat and rebellion issues. Some religion-based terrorism actions disrupted the peace process in Aceh, but it is certain that the terrorist networks had nothing to do with GAM and Acehese. They only used Aceh as an escape area when they were hunted by security forces in Java.

Implications – The values of Islam in Aceh are not easily penetrated by radicalism offered by the terrorist groups. Peace and stability in Aceh have been maintained up to now. After gaining considerable advantage from power sharing with the Government of Indonesia, GAM has been comfortable with the situation and forgotten the idea of independence. Conflicts and armed violence occur frequently in some places, but they have been transforming from vertical (between the Indonesian military/TNI and GAM) to horizontal lines with various reasons. The most prominent one is the question of access to power, which in turn has an impact on economic access.

Keywords Aceh-Indonesia, Terrorism, Conflict, Elections

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1. Introduction

The peace agreement between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or GAM), known as the Helsinki MoU, has been in effect for almost seven years. During the period, peace has been maintained, and security conditions have been relatively stable. The hurdles to the peace process in Aceh include conflicts during local elections of 2006, 2009, and 2012; chaotic distribution of funds for the rehabilitation and reintegration process; and an increase in crime, poverty and government mismanagement, and terrorism. Apparently, the people of Aceh have been tired of conflicts and do not want to re-experience them. Aceh has now entered a new environment that has never happened since mid-1970s.

On the basis of many conflicts and the dynamics of development of Aceh after the peace agreement, this study was designed to focus on two issues: religion-based terrorism and local elections in 2006, 2009, and 2012. The issue of religion-based terrorism is not discussed in depth because it is actually not a part of the dynamics of the Acehnese people. Religion-based terrorism in Aceh just exploits the moment and place where the perpetrators have absolutely no affinity with the Acehnese.

2. Religion-based terrorism in ACEH

The Acehnese were surprised by the incident in which the police attacked a terrorist group in Aceh in March 2010. The security forces surrounded an armed radical group in the Aceh Besar Regency, about 60 km east of Banda Aceh, which lasted nearly a month. Nine terrorists were killed, 21 people were arrested, and the rest fled to North Sumatra, Riau, and West Sumatra, who then involved in acts of horrendous terrorism. After the siege, the police routinely conducted many raids and arrested suspected terrorists. There was a growing fear that the incident and other violent incidents taking place in Aceh would undermine the peace process, which also raises the question of the link between the incidents and former members of GAM.

The existence of terrorist groups in Aceh is quite surprising because up until now Aceh has seemed to be resistant to any terrorist movement. The terrorist groups were groups of outsiders who came to Aceh after the tsunami disaster in 2004 to help the people of Aceh. They lived comfortably in Aceh because they were far from the pursuit of the security forces who hunted the terrorist groups in Java. Moreover, Aceh was so open and lack of control over the security forces, especially at the beginning of the disaster. These outsiders pleased with the nature of Aceh, which was very beautiful and strategic, as well as with the dynamics of the people of Aceh, who were warmly welcoming the Islamic law (Sharia). Aceh was used as a military training center of radical Islam and terrorism. They also considered Aceh as an escape area after they were hunted by security forces in Java. A question arising here is whether the conflict in Aceh has “transformed” from the separatist movement into the religion-based terrorist movement?

During the conflict, GAM was keen to avoid labeling Islam for its movement in the eyes of international community. Since the beginning of the rebellion, GAM has never put forward the ideological-religious aspects as the bases for its opposition activities. The image of GAM formed by its members in the international world was more as a secessionist movement based on ethnonationalism. During the conflict, efforts of some parties in Jakarta to associate GAM with a terrorist movement, particularly after September 11, 2001, did not succeed in changing national and international public opinion. GAM is still seen as an armed separatist movement.

It is proved in subsequent development that terrorism in Aceh was not related to the previous conflicts, GAM, and separatism. Some figures that were thought to have links with

terrorist groups in Aceh came from outside Aceh. They made Aceh a military training base because they assumed that the province would benefit their movement. This assumption was apparently wrong.

According to Rizal Sukma (2010), the terrorist groups made three mistakes in choosing Aceh. First, they predicted, as the sole province in Indonesia which implemented Sharia and was known as a strong religious region, Aceh would be more tolerant to a radical ideology that they were fighting for. Second, they thought, when they acted against the law, people would easily suspect GAM or the security forces as the culprit. Third, they also took advantage of the historical facts of Aceh as the base of the Darul Islam Movement/Islamic Army of Indonesia (Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia or DI/TII), which fought for an autonomous Aceh within a wider Islamic state of Indonesia (1953–1962). However, they did not realize that Aceh they encountered was no longer like Aceh in the past. Aceh had become an area in which conflict was fueled by the spirit of struggle against injustice rather than ideological sentiments.

Besides fighting for an autonomous Aceh within a wider Islamic state of Indonesia, DI/TII, led by Daud Beureueh, protested against the Government of Indonesia for making Aceh a part of the North Sumatera Province judicial area which distinctly ignored Aceh's huge contribution in supporting the existence of the still young Republic in 1945. Therefore, Aceh's DI/TII was, by its nature, different from GAM, which aimed for independence (Aspinall, 2005).

Governor Irwandi Yusuf, a former GAM commander, stated unequivocally that the terrorist groups had nothing to do with Aceh or former GAM combatants. However, it was true that the terrorist groups had succeeded in recruiting the sons of Aceh. It means that there were conditions that allowed the penetration of radical ideologies and terrorism into the people of Aceh. This fact should gain serious attention from the government and the people of Aceh.

3. Post-conflict elections in ACEH

The reform era (1998) began after the collapse of Soeharto's regime. The political system, especially the electoral system in Indonesia, undergone a drastic change in that period. In the pre-reform period, governors and regents/mayors were elected by the local parliaments, whereas in the post-reform period, they have directly been elected by citizens through local elections called the general elections of regional heads (Pemilihan Umum Kepala Daerah or Pemilukada).

This new political system has been implemented in all regions in Indonesia, including Aceh. In the case of Aceh, the elections had peculiarities in which they were not only a part of the Indonesian political system, but also a part of a peace agreement as outlined in the Helsinki MoU. The peace agreement between the Government of Indonesia and GAM signed in Helsinki on August 15, 2005, required the implementation of local elections in Aceh as part of the stages for peace building. In this case, the elections are the transitional processes that must be conducted based on the Helsinki agreement. According to Teitel, in the context of transition, elections are the most objective political procedural mechanism in creating a new system. This means, the elections in Aceh were part of the peace process, so they can be said to be part of conflict resolution (Arinanto, 2005).

Therefore, in contrast to other regions, the implementation of the elections in Aceh is quite different from other regions in Indonesia, which include several reasons. First, Aceh is still in a transitional period where small conflicts could easily be changed to major conflicts. Elections are also considered to be an attempt to resolve conflicts. However, they can also provide an opportunity for the creation of conflicts. In the case of Aceh, post-conflict

elections are feared for the emergence of separatism because Aceh has just entered a peace environment after a long conflict. If the post-election conflict in Aceh takes place, it will be not only a matter of anarchy or public dissatisfaction, but also a big political and ideological issue, that is, the reemergence of Aceh separatist movements.

Second, the most interesting one, is the existence of local parties that participate in the elections in Aceh. Currently, Aceh is the only province in Indonesia that recognizes the legal existence of the local party as outlined in the Helsinki MoU. Third, Aceh is a region which pioneered the independent (non-party affiliated) candidates to participate in the elections. The existence of local political parties and independent candidates is interesting because, in the context of democracy, Aceh has been a pioneer in the two cases. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that Aceh is a measure of failure or success of democracy in Indonesia.

As a country that is in transition to democracy, the potential for conflicts in all regions of Indonesia is very high. A number of politically motivated violence incidents due to the elections which are prevalent in Indonesia show that the elections could result in tensions and instability.

The transitional period often results in conflicts because there will be at least two groups facing each other in getting the same thing. During the period, several problems raised because of power polarization or political factionalization as happened in Colombia in the 1990s between the left and right factions, or the power struggle between the government and the ruling Maoist faction in Nepal where thousands of citizens and the king were killed (Chermick, 1996). In Afghanistan, the first post-Najibullah government, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Gulbuddin Hekmatiyar fought against Burhanuddin Rabbani (President) and Ahmed Shah Massoud (Tajik military commander) (Ganguly, 1996).

In Aceh, GAM is split into two factions. Although the majority of GAM members accept the Helsinki MoU, some people refuse and are still in favor of independence. Even in the pro-MoU faction, there are a lot of intrigues leading to violent conflict, especially during the nomination of candidates for governor/regents/mayors or parliament members.

Some elections were conducted in Aceh: 2012 (gubernatorial and regency/mayoral elections), 2006/2007 (gubernatorial and regency/mayoral elections), and 2009 (presidential and national parliamentary elections as well as local parliamentary elections). These elections led to conflicts undermining the stability and threatened the existing peace. The conflict that occurred in the 2012 elections, to some extent, resulted from the excess of the conflict in the 2006 and 2009 elections.

4. Conclusion

Aceh still has problems and challenges in maintaining peace. Many issues have not been resolved, and some processes are still ongoing. Of many conflicts, excluding religion-based terrorism, conflicts occurred in Aceh after the peace agreement have a different pattern from the previous conflicts. If the previous conflict is between GAM and TNI, then the current conflict is more among former GAM members. The seizure of power and access to economic resources is the main root of GAM's internal conflict. On the one hand, it expresses optimism that the conflict with separatist background in Aceh relatively no longer exists. On the other hand, the new conflict splits the people of Aceh. The awareness of the political elites in Aceh, especially ex-GAM combatants to maintain the cohesiveness of Acehnese, is really important. Hence, it is necessary to provide political education for them because they have the ethics standards and civilized political culture.

In terms of religion-based terrorism issues, Aceh is a community that has a strong belief in Islam. However, Islam in Aceh cannot easily be infiltrated by radical movements. In the past, Aceh was a region demanding the practice of Islamic laws, but it was not done by force

and violence. The issues of resistance and rebellion in Aceh, especially the issues associated with GAM, were not in the context of the struggle for an Islamic state, but for the sake of justice and humanity. Therefore, terrorism and radical Islamic movements in Aceh will never attract a majority of Acehnese.

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