



## **Aceh's Struggle for Independence: Considering the Role of Islam in a Separatist**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Tension and conflict marred the relationship between the Indonesian government in Jakarta and Indonesia's northernmost province of Aceh for most of the last half century. At the core of the center-periphery rift between Jakarta and Aceh was the Acehnese desire for political autonomy, although that desire has enjoyed varying degrees of support in Aceh since the region was incorporated into an independent Indonesian state in 1953.<sup>1</sup> Shortly after the formation of the Indonesian state, Acehnese joined with the national resistance movement, Darul Islam, to launch the first post-colonial armed struggle in Aceh. Two decades later, the issue of political autonomy still had not been resolved. The Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka; GAM) formed in response and maintained a 29-year armed struggle against the government of Indonesia to a political system in Aceh free from the authority of the Indonesian state.

The character of the Darul Islam movement and the Free Aceh movement differ in a critical respect. Darul Islam primarily aimed to establish an Islamic Government over all of Indonesia; political autonomy for Aceh was only a secondary aim. The *ulama*, religious clerics, led the struggles reflecting the centrality of religion to the movement's ideology. In contrast, the Free Aceh

movement (GAM) was not associated with the *ulama* and, although the Islamic character of GAM is inseparable from its identity, its objectives maintained a clear political focus.

Part I of this article will examine the major aspects of Acehnese identity. Part II will examine the changing role of the *ulama* in Aceh after Indonesia gained its independence. It will argue that marginalization of the *ulama* by the Suharto government and repression against the Acehnese helped create a movement with a distinct political character whose religious attributes were ambiguous at best. Part III will describe the evolution of The Free Aceh Movement and the conditions that finally led to successful peace talks between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement in 2005. Part IV will consider the erroneous portrayal of GAM in the Western media as an Islamic movement and argue that both rhetoric from the Indonesian government and shallow analysis led to this portrayal. This article argues that Islam forms a critical subcurrent in the ideology of GAM because it is a reflection of the Acehnese culture and identity, but not because the group maintains Islamic political aspirations.

### **PART I: AN ANALYSIS OF ACEHNESE IDENTITY**

Aceh's location on the island of Sumatra is of strategic importance, both economically and militarily. The island lies at the mouth of the Malacca Strait, which is the busiest international sea-lane in the world today.<sup>2</sup> While it would be an exaggeration to argue Aceh holds the same strategic character as the Suez or Panama Canal, its geography is of strategic importance to other states in the international system. Moreover, vast natural gas and oil reserves were discovered in Aceh in the last 30 years, eclipsing the importance of Aceh's agricultural and timber industries. The Aceh province is a strategic asset to the Indonesian government in Jakarta.

The Indonesian national census estimated Aceh's population to be 1.7 million people in 2000. Matthew Davies' compilation of several more recent surveys suggests that the population is likely closer to 4.5 million people.<sup>3</sup> Far from a homogeneous society, Aceh is home to several distinct ethnic groups. Although the largest group is said to represent 75 to 90 percent of the population, it is subdivided by seven distinct dialects and maintains no identifiable racial commonality.<sup>4</sup> Despite the many differences separating the people of Aceh, they have developed a strong regional and ethnic character.

The Acehnese identity is derived from a combination of historical pride associated with the Acehnese Sultanate, a collective memory of struggle against the Dutch colonizers, and a common and regionally specific form of Islam. The shared Acehnese sense of a unique and glorious past has several roots. The Sultanate of Aceh was the first Muslim Kingdom established in Southeast Asia. Arab and Indian traders, through outposts established from the eleventh century, brought Islam and political organization to a long line of Aceh Kingdoms. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Acehnese Sultanate had expanded territorially, developed an extensive trade network, and developed into the center of a flourishing Islamic culture containing rich scholarly debates.<sup>5</sup>

As The Netherlands and other European colonial powers expanded their global colonial

assets in the region, they gradually conquered the area surrounding the Aceh Kingdom. By the nineteenth century, Aceh was the sole remaining independent entity, although it had long ago lost its status as a regional power.<sup>6</sup> The Acehnese were eventually defeated militarily and subjugated by the Dutch, but sporadic guerilla attacks continued and the Acehnese remained extremely independent in their behavior.<sup>7</sup> In a 1948 speech, the first president of Indonesia acknowledged the pivotal role Aceh played in Indonesia's independence movement, when he stated, "The people of Aceh carried this struggle to the very end; they attacked, staved off and held back Dutch imperialism from entering the province of Aceh."<sup>8</sup>

Important as the shared history of glory and resistance is to the notion of the Acehnese identity, Islam is truly the common denominator of unification in the region. James Siegel argues in *The Rope of God* that only Islam was able to supersede village-level identification and loyalty among the Acehnese. Siegel writes that, in the nineteenth century, "the basis of effective ties between people from different sectors of society was not common dependence and mutual need for each other as villager, lord, sultan, and *uleebelang*<sup>9</sup>, but common identity as Muslims, which superseded all other distinctions."<sup>10</sup> Jacqueline Siapno, in her extensive ethnographic study of Aceh, argues that Acehnese Islam is perceived by those in the region as distinctive from the practice of Islam in the rest of Indonesia. Because Islam first arrived in Aceh, the Acehnese see their territory as a center for religious thought and devotion in relation to the rest of Indonesia.<sup>11</sup>

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When Indonesian nationalism emerged as a force in the twentieth century, it was not seen as incompatible with Aceh's identity. The Acehnese lent significant support, both financially and militarily, for the war of independence against the Dutch colonialists. There were no demands among Aceh's political and religious leadership for a separate Acehese state.<sup>12</sup> Edward Aspinall analyzes Acehese society and the Indonesian state following independence and concludes there was an inverse relationship between the economic and administrative integration of Aceh into the national state and the level of popular support for the integration.<sup>13</sup>

The weakness of the Indonesian government in its early years permitted Aceh to become an autonomous province of Indonesia with Daud Beureueh, a prominent *ulama*, as its governor.<sup>14</sup> As Aceh's regional power was eroded and it was incorporated into the Indonesian state, discontent grew, ultimately resulting in armed conflict. Aceh joined the Darul Islam movement under the leadership of Daud Beureueh and Aceh's *ulama*. The changing power structure in Aceh and the *ulama*'s rise as the principle leaders in Aceh's society helps to explain the character of the 1950s armed conflict.

## PART II: THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE *ULAMA* IN ACEH

When Aceh joined the Darul Islam rebellion, the *ulama* had long established supremacy as the leaders of Aceh. This movement began in West Java in an attempt to establish a federal Islamic state of Indonesia.<sup>15</sup> The early resistance to colonization in the 1800s was marked by cooperation between the *uleebalang* (the regional chiefs) and the *ulama*, both serving as legitimate leaders of society. When the *uleebalang* were defeated, the *ulama* continued the resistance against the Dutch. John Martinkus argues that, over the 40-year period of colonization, the Dutch separated the two leaderships by employing

*uleebalang* as regional administrators and marginalizing the *ulama*.<sup>16</sup> Radicalization of the *ulama* began as leaders such as Cik Di Tiro appealed to the religious legitimacy of the resistance to the point that Martinkus and other scholars have called it a holy war.<sup>17</sup> The Dutch were expelled shortly before the Japanese gained control of Aceh in WWII, from 1942 to 1945. Under Japanese occupation the *ulama* continued to direct a guerrilla struggle; at the same time, the Japanese, in an attempt to gain the *ulama*'s support, created religious courts and recognized Islamic law on certain issues, which also worked to strengthen the *ulama*'s formal authority.<sup>18</sup>

Following the Japanese withdrawal the *ulama* established their supremacy as the principle leaders of Aceh. From 1947 to 1948 the Dutch returned to reestablish a colonial regime, and a battle for independence ensued between the Dutch and the newly established Republic of Indonesia. Recognizing the transformation in power structure and the strength of

the *ulama*, the Republic of Indonesia named Daud Beureueh as governor.<sup>19</sup> During this period the *ulama* removed the *uleebalang* as players in Aceh's society by killing their most prominent leaders and seizing *uleebalang* property, conducted through attacks by the All Aceh Religious Scholars Association (PUSA).<sup>20</sup> The *uleebalang* lost their legitimacy as they were viewed as a left over institution from the colonial period, a group no longer representing the general interest. This loss of legitimacy allowed the *ulama* to become the supreme leaders in Aceh.

During the revolution the *ulama* and Acehese were able to think in terms of Acehese, Islamic and Indonesian with no conflict between the three. However, shortly after Indonesia gained independence, the interests of the Acehese *ulama* began to diverge from the central government in Jakarta.<sup>21</sup> The *ulama* resented the rejection of the Islamic State for a secular government. In consolidating their control over the outer

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provinces, the Republic removed Aceh's special independence status, sent non-Acehnese civil servants to the region and refused to recognize the Islamic courts run by the *ulama*.<sup>22</sup> Rising tensions in Aceh reached an explosive point in 1953 during an election year, which saw an ideological battle between defenders of secularism and advocates of an Islamic State.<sup>23</sup> In 1953 Daud Beureueh began a rebellion in Aceh and declared

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The rebellion ended in 1959 after the central government promised to grant special autonomy status to Aceh, granting significant concessions. Aceh was granted autonomy in the fields of religion, customary law and education.<sup>24</sup> The agreements allowed for the reestablishment of Islamic courts and permitted the *ulama* to combine the state educational system with the *madrassas* (religious

schools), increasing the role of Islam in education. The concessions show the Darul Islam struggle was as much about political autonomy for Aceh as it was about the desire to increase the role of religion and the power of the *ulama*. The central focus Islam played in this struggle is markedly different from the purely political focus of the later Free Aceh Movement. As the proceeding paragraphs will describe, several factors precipitated the shift away from religion between the earlier Darul Islam and later Free Aceh Movement.

The change in focus between the Darul Islam and Free Aceh movements owed much to the political change in Jakarta with the displacement of President Sukarno. In 1965, the Indonesian government was overthrown and a staunch anti-communist regime, dominated by the military and led by Mohammad Suharto, took power. This regime effectively revoked Aceh's special region status, leading to a new conflict based on the

tension between central government control and Aceh's desire for autonomy.<sup>25</sup>

The Suharto regime, referred to as The New Order, marginalized the Acehnese *ulama* and sponsored a new group of government elites to fill the leadership void in Aceh. These mechanisms were used as part of a larger scheme to bring all power groups under the control of the central government—a policy that led to the loss of Aceh's regional autonomy and the centralization of government and political power.<sup>26</sup> During this period the *ulama* saw a significant decrease in their power as the government removed the group from political positions, prohibited them from promoting Islam in the political realm, and restricted their control over the Islamic educational system. By manipulating elections, and through intimidation and incentives, the government replaced the *ulama* with a new group of technocratic elites.<sup>27</sup> Although many technocrats descended from *ulama* families, the government supported their rise to leadership because they possessed overseas educational experience and desired to support the government's modernization plans.<sup>28</sup>

In an attempt to counter autonomous Islamic organizations and political movements that could cause instability and threaten the state, The New Order established a nation-wide council of *ulama*, bringing the group under the regime's institutional umbrella.<sup>29</sup> Some *ulama* in Aceh sought to take advantage of the new opportunities for access to the government patronage network and joined the government sponsored Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) when it was finally established in 1975. The group became an officially sanctioned religious authority passing *fatwas* that tended to support government policy measures, leading independent *ulama* and intellectuals to accusations that the MUI was nothing more than a government mouthpiece.<sup>30</sup>

Thus, under The New Order Regime the leadership role of the *ulama* in Aceh suffered in several ways. The *ulama*, as a whole, was denied political access. The establishment of the MUI fractured the group, by dividing the independent *ulama* from those who participated in the government sanctioned organization. Finally, under The New Order Regime, the *ulama* suffered

from a lack of leadership. No leader emerged to the prominence of the sort achieved by Daud Beureueh in the 1950s, a fact that likely contributed to the divisions that emerged as some joined the MUI and others remained independent. Daud Beureueh himself switched his allegiance to the government party of technocrats in an election in the 1980s, indicating the extent to which the *ulama* had lost their position as an independent, cohesive and powerful social and political group.<sup>31</sup>

In the absence of The New Order, the Acehnese would have looked to the *ulama* for leadership during the 1980s, when they once again found themselves alienated by the central government. However, by then the option was no longer available to them because the *ulama* were no longer capable of countering state power as a cohesive unit and were seen simply as agents of a foreign power.<sup>32</sup> Lacking other channels for political expression, the Acehnese were presented with a new means of addressing their grievances. The Free Aceh Movement began to command significant support in the 1980s, when regional grievances led to widespread guerilla warfare.<sup>33</sup> In sidelining the *ulama* while continuing to promote a highly centralized political structure that did little for the economic improvement of the majority of Acehnese, The New Order created an opportunity for a politically-based movement to command widespread Acehnese support for political independence from Jakarta.

### **PART III: THE FREE ACEH MOVEMENT (GAM)**

In 1976 Hasan Di Tiro formed GAM, a separatist organization formally called the Aceh-Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF). Throughout its 29-year struggle, three distinct phases of operation can be discerned. GAM incorporated many different elements of Acehnese society and became an organization through which all Acehnese grievances could be channeled. Originally, GAM attracted little support from the Acehnese; however, Acehnese involvement in the movement increased from each phase of operations to the next as the Acehnese identity became increasingly alienated from Indonesian Society. The details of GAM's plan for Acehnese independence also evolved

over this period, most notably when it shifted its demands from a return to the Sultanate to support for a democratic election to determine Aceh's fate. Nonetheless, the overarching goal driving GAM's struggle remained constant: independence from the Indonesian government in Jakarta.

The first phase of GAM's operation lasted from 1976 to 1979. Although GAM attracted little support during this period, the period created the foundation for what would be a very powerful secessionist movement. In GAM's 1976 *Declaration of Independence of Aceh* the organization lays out the central aim of the struggle:

We the people of Aceh, Sumatra... do hereby declare ourselves free and independent from all political control of the foreign regime of Jakarta and the alien people of the island of Java... From now on, we intend to be the masters in our own house: the only way life is worth living; to make our own laws: as we see fit; to become the guarantor of our own freedom and independence: for which we are capable; to become equal with all the peoples of the world: as our forefathers had always been. In short, to become sovereign in our one fatherland!<sup>34</sup>

Significantly, the declaration maintains a political and legal rather than a religious or theological focus.

The deliberate effort to focus the declaration on Aceh's legal right to independence is explained by Hasan Di Tiro's international experience. Di Tiro is a descendant of a prominent *ulama* and the grandson of Teuk Di Tiro who received the approval of the last sultanate of Aceh to succeed him. (Despite having received this approval, Di Tiro's surrender and exile by the Dutch prevented him from succeeding the last sultanate.) During the fight for independence, Di Tiro was a supporter of the Indonesian Nation. While studying in the United States, he was working part time at the United Nations mission until he lost favor with the Indonesian government by publicly supporting the Darul Islam rebellion in 1953. After Indonesia withdrew his diplomatic passport, Di Tiro obtained U.S. citizenship and

proceeded to establish a Darul Islam mission at the UN.<sup>35</sup> Di Tiro brought his UN experience to bear in 1976 when he authored Aceh's declaration of independence.

Di Tiro attempted to earn international legitimacy and garner support for The Free Aceh Movement by characterizing the struggle as a fight for self-determination. He argued that Indonesia's presence in Aceh was illegal and artificial product of Dutch colonization.<sup>36</sup> In the wake of WWII, the right to self-determination among the formerly colonized regions of the world began to work its way into the international system as a legal principle. The United Nations established the Special Political and Decolonization Committee. Article 1(2) of the UN Charter embodies the principle of self-determination, as do two International Covenants on Human Rights. Di Tiro recognized the opportunity to gain international support and to this end, Di Tiro ignored the Acehese *ulama's* early support to deemphasize any focus on separatist issues.

To initiate the independence movement, Di Tiro returned to Aceh and formed a small group of loyal followers. His tightly-knit, ideologically-driven organization of 70 men consisted of mostly peasants led by a well-educated elite.<sup>37</sup> The small number of followers was indicative of the limited support for GAM's goals in these early years of its struggle. For one, the absence of an Islamic agenda kept the *ulama* from supporting the movement and led some to denounce it.<sup>38</sup> Although marginalized and divided, the *ulama* would still have served as an effective vehicle for spreading a message and rallying support, particularly in the first year of GAM's conflict, prior to the formation of the MUI.

GAM also lacked an effective rallying cry in its first phase. By the mid-1970s, Aceh's rich natural resources had only just been discovered; it would take time before the feeling that outsiders were exploiting their region developed among the Acehese. There was also no clear vision for a

post-independence Aceh.<sup>39</sup> GAM originally called for a return to the Acehese Sultanate, with Di Tiro as its heir apparent. Although not necessarily incompatible with democratic principles—the Sultanate would likely have established itself as an independent entity with authority over customary law, while leaving the administrative duties to an elected government—these details were far from clear.<sup>40</sup> Finally, the movement failed to secure any major victories in its early years. The Indonesian military suppressed the GAM with relative ease; most of their fighters were killed and Di Tiro left Indonesia for exile in Sweden.<sup>41</sup>

In 1989, GAM resumed its military operations in Aceh with an improved organizational structure and a genuine support base. The increased organizational strength partly resulted from foreign assistance from Libya, where hundreds of GAM guerrillas were trained beginning in 1986.<sup>42</sup> Increased popular support derived from widespread economic

frustrations. By the 1980s Aceh supplied 30 percent of Indonesia's oil and gas exports, which served as the main source of the Jakarta government's revenues. However, budgeted spending for Aceh both the provincial and national governments represented only a fraction of the total wealth generated from the province.<sup>43</sup> As development and economic progress failed to reach most sectors in Aceh, the Acehese sense of alienation from Indonesia increased and the goal of an independent Aceh gained popularity. Widespread violence took hold from 1989 but subsided in 1992 as the Indonesian Army defeated GAM for a second time. However, the military's tactics and the harsh period of repression that followed had the direct effect of increasing Aceh's alienation from Indonesia and desire for independence.

In the ten years from 1989 to 1998 the Indonesian military committed gross human rights violations against the Acehese population as it sought to eliminate the GAM using increasingly repressive measures. Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other

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international NGOs documented the violence during this period. Two thousand Acehnese were killed, 3,429 tortured, and 500-1,000 disappeared; in addition, 625 cases of rape and at least 12 mass graves were investigated.<sup>44</sup> With the change in the government in Jakarta in 1998, the Acehnese demanded justice for the atrocities committed.<sup>45</sup> When GAM resumed its military operations in its third and final struggle against the Indonesian

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military, its list of grievances still focused on the end goal of independence for Aceh, but participation and support was now fueled by anger at the national armed forces, a sense of shared suffering and feelings of fear, distrust and hatred toward the Indonesian state.

As a new generation of GAM fighters replaced those that had fought in the Darul Islam rebellion, GAM's political agenda evolved. The new generation saw Islam as integral to Acehnese culture and identity, but

not politics.<sup>46</sup> In 2002, GAM officially changed its vision for Aceh's government post-independence from a return to the Sultanate in favor of a democratic process.<sup>47</sup>

GAM's leadership was also acutely aware of developments in the East Timorese struggle for independence, a fact that contributed to its decision to modify its goals for post-independence. East Timor began a 24-year armed struggle for secession in 1975 when Indonesia invaded and annexed from Portugal it as a province. When Suharto fell from power in 1999, the incoming President, B.J. Habibie, broke with previous policy and offered East Timor a choice between independence and autonomy within Indonesia. The referendum was held in August 1999 and the East Timorese overwhelmingly voted for independence. Anti-independence militia groups—supported by the military and

police—committed extreme violence and gross human rights violations in an attempt to reverse the process. Overwhelming international support followed the referendum in defense of a democratic process and will of the people.<sup>48</sup> The support was critical in implementing the referendum. The leadership of GAM, mindful of East Timor's experience, began to clearly emphasize democratic aspirations for Aceh.

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The role of Islam was in fact the most ambiguous of the shared foundations of GAM's struggle. The original Sultanate of Aceh allowed the practice of *shari'a* Law as a part of the official legal system, and the issue of whether it would be incorporated into a new sultanate was never clarified. Unlike the Darul Islam struggle, the relation between Islam and the state was not a focus of the organization. In addition to the absence of Islam in the international rhetoric of GAM, Eric Morris states that pamphlets issued in Aceh in the 1970s "made a straightforward ethnic appeal to rise up against Javanese colonialism. Attention was focused on Aceh's natural wealth." However, "Islamic appeals were noticeable by their absence."<sup>51</sup> Rachel Schiller stated that her interviews with the GAM leadership revealed that, in the 1980s, as GAM searched for outside training and support, Iran extended an offer, conditioned on GAM assuming an Islamic character.<sup>52</sup> That GAM accepted support from Libya instead, allowing the organization to maintain a political focus and simultaneously build organizational strength. Despite the ambiguity, however, GAM, as a popular movement in Aceh, had to reflect the religion's integration in every aspect of Acehnese life. Acts such as the use of the mosque network in 1999 to spread GAM's independence message were essential to gain the broadest possible support for the movement; GAM's goals would have been fatally undermined if it had declared itself a secular organization.<sup>53</sup>

GAM's position on *sharia* law was clarified in the same year that it came out in clear support of democracy, 2002. An official spokesman noted, "We encourage people to be good Muslims, but we don't think it's something for the state to decide."<sup>54</sup> It reiterated this stance in 2006: "If those elected by the people would be an Islamic party, and they want to create an Islamic government according to how they see it, then by all means, why not?"<sup>55</sup> Prior to this, GAM had strongly objected to the imposition of *shari'a* Law by the government of Indonesia.<sup>56</sup> In not taking a direct stand on the issue of *shari'a*, and the extent to which Islam drives GAM's struggle, the GAM leadership likely avoided internal divisions and maintained a unified focus of opposition to the Indonesian military and government.

It is important to see that any role religion may have played in the early demands for a return to the Acehnesse Sultanate has been completely eclipsed by the desire for self-rule due to economic inequality and human rights atrocities. GAM is not a militant Islamic organization and to label it as such ignores the dominant role that the Acehnesse grievances, developed in the 1980s and 1990s, played in defining their reasons for armed struggle against the government of Indonesia.

### *The Peace Initiatives and GAM's Political Orientation*

Critics may argue that GAM's articulated grievances could mask a hidden agenda focused on installing conservative Islamic rule, in an attempt to garner important international support for their cause. However, when GAM entered into the negotiations at various times during the struggle, including the final peace settlement in August 2005, their objectives remained consistent with the grievances they had articulated during their armed conflict and were non-religious in nature. The final effort establishing peace in Aceh reveals the most about the concessions GAM sought and the grievances that drove the struggle.

The first dialogue between GAM and the Indonesian government began during the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid. At the beginning of his term, Wahid stated publicly, "I support a referendum as their right. If we do it in

East Timor, why not in Aceh?"<sup>57</sup> Wahid proceeded with negotiations, although large parts of Aceh were under GAM's control and violence was escalating because of a military crackdown.

Official talks began in 2000, facilitated by a Swiss NGO. Despite a deteriorating situation in Aceh the negotiators agreed to a break in the violence aimed at reaching a

political solution to the conflict. Rizal Sukma argues that although some of the Indonesian military may have supported the cease-fire, the decision was clearly opposed by many officers; as a result, the agreement had little effect on the violence in Aceh.<sup>58</sup>

Prior to the 2000 peace talks, Jakarta passed a series of special autonomy laws, in an attempt to bring the conflict to a halt and erode support for secessionist movements in other provinces. However, as the reforms were made without consultation with the GAM leadership and did not go far enough to address GAM's core grievances, they had little effect in Aceh.<sup>59</sup> As a result, the 2000 peace talks ultimately did not realize expectations. In a shift from the previous administration's conciliatory approach, upon assuming the presidency in 2001, Megawati Sukarnoputri declared there would be no future referendums in Aceh or other provinces. Nonetheless, in February 2002, a new round of talks began. Sukma calls this a "calculated act meant to suggest a military solution was indeed the last resort" and argues that the starting demands of the Indonesian government were so unpalatable to GAM that no peace deal had a chance.<sup>60</sup> After the failure of the 2002 peace talks, the national government declared martial law in Aceh and increased military operations forcing GAM on the defensive.

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Several factors allowed for a new round of peace talks. The impact of military operations in Aceh left GAM weakened and willing to explore an exit from the protracted conflict, the tsunami in January 2005 changed the dynamic in Aceh and left most parties with a desire to eliminate future suffering in the region, and most importantly the political will of a new administration allowed for meaningful discussions between GAM and the Indonesian government. After Jakarta declared martial law in Aceh, GAM's main concern became the protection of its military forces and top leadership, moving away from a concentration on offensive attacks on military and police posts.<sup>61</sup> The Government reached out to GAM's field commanders prior to the 2005 tsunami and preparations for talks were making progress, arguably because of the GAM's weakened position.<sup>62</sup>

Although the destruction and suffering caused by the tsunami added an additional sense of urgency and will to reach a solution, it was nonetheless not the sole impetus for peace as common knowledge would have it. Rather, the most important turn of events was the election of Susilo Yudhoyono and Yusif Kalla as President and Vice President. During their campaign, Yudhoyono and Kalla made peace in Aceh an important issue, stressing their desire to work toward a lasting solution.<sup>63</sup> The vice president had a long-standing interest in ending the conflict and had been a participant in the East Timorese negotiations. The President was a former general and commanded the critical support of the military, which provided an opportunity for a political solution to be accepted by the forces on the ground.<sup>64</sup> Upon entering office, Yudhoyono and Kalla brought with them the political will to end the conflict.

The success of the negotiations ultimately depended on good facilitation, will to negotiate and some creative solutions, preventing past

mistakes. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed in August 2005 in Helsinki, and represented the first peace agreement reached during the three-decade struggle. During the negotiation, the Finnish President, who served as mediator, employed innovative techniques such as laying down a ground rule that anything could be discussed and negotiated, but that nothing was agreed until everything was agreed.<sup>65</sup> This proved an important tool, as it gave the parties the ability to open a dialogue and come to an understanding over critical issues without constantly worrying about the end result. Other important factors contributed to the success in implementing the agreement, such as the introduction of European observers immediately following the implementation of the MoU. It was also rumored

that the Indonesian government made significant transfer payments to the military in order to gain their support for the peace process.<sup>66</sup>

The final solution, contained in the Memorandum of Understanding, reveals much about the concessions GAM sought and the grievances that drove the struggle. The MoU called for a more equitable distribution of Aceh's resources; greater autonomy in Aceh relating to the rule of law; amnesty and reintegration of GAM soldiers accompanied by disarmament; a human rights tribunal mechanisms for monitoring the peace; and a

process for dispute settlement. The section of the agreement addressing Aceh's governing structure provides significant autonomy for the province, including required consultation with the Acehese legislature before the Indonesian government may enter into treaties with other governments that impact Aceh. The Indonesian government, however, maintains some prerogatives, most importantly in the fields of justice and freedom of religion. The concessions that were accepted by GAM were political in nature and not religious and Islam is not

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mentioned in the agreement. GAM's priorities during negotiations were thus in line with their articulated grievances and the political focus of the organization.<sup>67</sup>

#### PART IV: MISCHARACTERIZATION OF GAM IN THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIA

A survey of journalistic accounts from 1998 to 2000 indicates that some articles covering events in Aceh created the perception that religion played a much larger role in GAM's fight for independence than it actually did. Some media accounts of the Aceh movement characterized the group as militant Islamic. The flawed characterizations reflected the lack of media access to Aceh; the variety of opinion and ambiguity within GAM's organization; the Indonesian government's efforts to emphasize the Islamic character of Aceh; and finally, a shallow analysis of the Aceh movement.

As hostilities resumed in Aceh in 1998, in the beginning of GAM's third phase of violent resistance, articles from around the world emphasized the Islamic character of the organization. An article from the Associated Press appearing in *The Boston Globe* on December 31, 1998, stated, "Resentment against the military runs deep in Aceh, where the army has been accused of widespread atrocities against civilians in its campaign against *Islamic separatists*."<sup>68</sup> An Associated Press article from the same period also labeled the group "*Islamic separatist rebels*."<sup>69</sup> In what proved to be a more typical characterization of GAM during the period, the *Financial Times*, while writing about foreign support for the territorial integrity of Indonesia, termed GAM's guerillas as "*Aceh's Islamic Militants*."<sup>70</sup> These articles portray GAM in a way that does not reflect the grievances or objectives of the organization and thus represent a shallow analysis of the conflict.

The Indonesian government sought to emphasize GAM's Islamic elements and distract from other grievances, also contributing to the distortion in the western press. In 2002, Indonesia implemented *shari'a* law. Jakarta portrayed the measure as a solution for ending the conflict in Aceh, though it was immediately rejected by GAM.<sup>71</sup> The move was likely an attempt to

distract international attention from human rights abuses in Aceh and increase fears of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the province.<sup>72</sup> The government may have further attempted to discredit GAM through three convictions in the Indonesian Christmas Eve Bombings in 2000. Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), a terrorist organization that holds Islam at the center of its ideology, claimed responsibility for bombings that targeted Christian churches across Indonesia in 2000. Nonetheless, three members of GAM were prosecuted for operational support. The International Crisis group wrote, "It is hard to avoid the suspicion that someone in the armed forces... saw the possibility that it could be blamed on GAM, despite the illogic of GAM's taking part in an attack on Churches."<sup>73</sup> GAM was blamed in August 2000 for a grenade attack on the Malaysian embassy and a bombing of the Jakarta Stock Exchange. The truth behind these accusations remains unclear; again, there may have been an attempt by the military to discredit GAM.

Considering the military's vested interest in maintaining the Aceh conflict, it is plausible the military sought to discredit GAM. Beyond a desire to fulfill their role as defenders of the state, there was an economic component that could have led to a desire to continue operations in Aceh. The central government provides only 20 to 25 percent of the operational costs of the military, making it extremely dependent on other sources of revenue—much of which is generated in the Aceh region. These sources include corruption, arms sales by the military, and exploitation of Aceh's logging industry.<sup>74</sup> The military thus had a strong interest in maintaining its presence in Aceh; peace initiatives proceeded only with the election of a former General who commanded enough control over the military establishment.

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## CONCLUSION

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The solution to the Aceh conflict teaches the importance of leaders and political will, but another important lesson should be drawn from the several decades of struggle. There is a need for careful nuanced analysis in order to establish the root causes of the violence. There may have very well been a different outcome in Aceh had the international press as a whole characterized the group as a militant Islamic organization.

Islam formed a subcurrent in the ideology of the Free Aceh Movement as a reflection of Acehnese identity and character. But in the three phases of GAM's struggle, the organization remained committed to the political goal of independence for Aceh and was not a religiously

focused organization. The motivations behind the conflict evolved over three decades to include at the center a desire of justice for the human rights violations committed by the army and a demand for access to the wealth generated from Aceh's natural resources. The peace settlement reached in August 2005 is holding and was recently implemented by the Indonesian legislature.

*The views and opinions expressed in articles are strictly the author's own, and do not necessarily represent those of al Nakhlah, its Advisory and Editorial Boards, or the Program for Southwest Asia and Islamic Civilization (SWAIC) at The Fletcher School.*

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