

Aceh: Struggle for Self-Determination (1998-2001)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

An independent kingdom prior to Dutch colonization of the East Indies located on the northwestern end of the island of Sumatra, the Acehnese have long resisted centralized control by Jakarta. An armed rebellion, backed by the CIA to destabilize the leftist Indonesian government of Sukarno, flared briefly in the late 1950s. A new armed rebellion was launched against the right-wing military dictatorship of Suharto in the 1970s, led by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), with the goal of independence. Acehnese civilians were caught in the crossfire and suffered terrible human rights abuses at the hands of the Indonesian armed forces (TNI), particularly as violence escalated in the 1990s. In 1999, inspired by the referendum for independence in East Timor, student activists rejecting both Indonesian rule and the armed struggle of GAM, adopted a program of mass mobilization in support of a referendum on the future of Aceh. The Acehnese organized a series of rallies, boycotts and strikes. The Indonesian regime was astounded when hundreds of thousands of people (out of a population of 4 million) participated in pro-referendum rallies.

Political History:

Aceh is the northernmost province on the island of Sumatra, located west of the Malay Peninsula. Islam came to Aceh over 1,000 years ago, and the majority of Aceh's current 4.3 million inhabitants practice a slightly more conservative form of Islam than that of the rest of Indonesia. Muslim leaders and legal principles have been highly influential since at least the fifteenth century, though Acehnese women have a relative degree of freedom compared to women in some parts of the Middle East.

Aceh has been of interest to colonial powers for centuries. The Strait of Malacca, immediately north and west of Aceh, is strategically valuable for shipping because it narrowly connects the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Marco Polo encountered six major trading ports on the island during his travels there in 1292. The Dutch, British and Portuguese arrived in the sixteenth century and competed for control of the region despite intense resistance from the local people. The Dutch attempted to colonize Aceh in 1873, sparking a bloody thirty-year war. More than 100,000 Acehnese were killed.

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Resistance to colonization continued until the Japanese invaded during the Second World War, forcing the Dutch to retreat. Many Acehnese then turned their resistance on the Japanese. Indonesia declared independence from the Netherlands two days after the Japanese retreated, on August 17, 1945. In a four-year conflict, the Dutch tried to re-conquer the archipelago, but recognized Indonesia's independence in 1949.

Aceh was incorporated into the Republic of Indonesia as the province of North Sumatra in 1950. Many Acehnese viewed the central government in Jakarta as corrupt and oppressive. An open rebellion broke out in 1953—Aceh's first attempt to secede from Indonesia—with clandestine support from the U.S. government. The conflict was resolved through compromise and conciliation between Acehnese insurgents and the Indonesian Republic. In 1959 Aceh gained special semi-autonomous status in matters of religion, education and local governance. However, this compromise did not address the underlying Acehnese aspiration for independence. Furthermore, the conditions outlined in the agreement were never fully implemented by either the left-leaning Sukarno or the right-wing military dictatorship of Suharto that came to power in 1965.

From 1967 to 1998, Aceh suffered greatly under the U.S.-backed authoritarian regime of Suharto. Suharto rose up through the ranks of the military and orchestrated a vicious purge of suspected leftists, with as many as half a million people killed throughout Indonesia, before formally assuming the presidency in 1968. Vigilante groups throughout Indonesia copied his example but with added zeal. A mass anticommunist hysteria ensued that claimed many lives. Suharto brought into being a "New Order" based on Western models of economic development. Civil liberties and dissent were not tolerated by his regime and Suharto repeatedly held rigged or uncontested elections. His inner circle amassed great wealth by monopolizing and controlling parts of the economy. Despite corruption and repression, his regime enjoyed support from Western governments, foreign corporations and the country's wealthy. Acehnese natural gas and oil reserves were brought into production beginning in 1970 and the profits were siphoned off to the central government and foreign corporations. Between 80 and 90 percent of Aceh's wealth left the province. The Acehnese, many of whom struggled merely to survive, viewed the siphoning off of their wealth as an act of Javanese colonialism and a betrayal of basic

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Islamic principles. TNI (Indonesian military) soldiers were called by various pejoratives likening them to Dutch colonizers.

A militant group, known as the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM), emerged in late 1976 to wage guerilla war for Acehnese independence. Hasan de Tiro, a descendent of Acehnese royalty, led the GAM in Aceh, and later from Sweden after his exile in 1979. Initially the GAM was a disorganized band of 70 fighters and the TNI all but crushed them by 1977, but GAM reemerged in 1989. It reportedly received weapons from Iran, Libya and undisclosed Southeast Asian nations, with arms being smuggled into the region through southern Thailand.

In response to GAM armed resistance, the Indonesian military classified Aceh as a military operations area from 1989 to 1998. This classification turned Aceh into a free-fire zone. Terrible violations of human rights occurred, primarily by the TNI, and included torture, rapes and disappearances. A practice cynically termed “shock therapy” by the TNI involved killing suspected dissidents and displaying their bodies by the roadside. Shock therapy only increased local support for the GAM. Many Acehnese were caught in the fighting between the TNI and the GAM. Acehnese civil society became paralyzed. Massacres and ambushes were perpetrated. Traumatized by violence, many villagers fled to refugee camps. Homes, schools and offices were burned. Violence became routine: the nongovernmental organization Human Rights Watch estimated more than 2,000 Acehnese were killed in unlawful executions and torture between 1989 and 1993 alone. More than 12,000 civilians were killed during the conflict as a whole. Investigations into the succession of killings, rapes and suspicious disappearances were not conducted despite ample documentation and eyewitness testimony. TNI officers later denied any responsibility for the human rights violations, saying low ranking soldiers acted beyond their orders. Indonesia’s National Commission on Human Rights uncovered and disclosed mass graves in 1998. Many Acehnese were afraid to speak out in the prevailing climate of fear and persecution. However, two related factors contributed greatly to the rapid development and expansion of Acehnese nonviolent action for independence. A national financial crisis in 1998-99 destabilized Suharto’s regime and he was forced out of office in a civil insurrection based in the capital. Inflation reached 630 percent. Political chaos in Jakarta hobbled the central government, as Abdurrahman Wahid became the new president. At

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the opposite end of the Indonesian archipelago, a United Nations-backed referendum on East Timorese independence was conducted on August 31, 1999, in which the East Timorese voted in internationally-supervised elections to secede from Indonesia. The example reignited Acehnese demands. Although Aceh was internationally-recognized as part of Indonesia (unlike East Timor, which had been seen a case of Indonesian occupation), Acehnese activists called for the same right that East Timorese had just exercised to determine their future status. These events contributed to a mass upwelling of protests demanding a referendum for independence; justice for human rights violations; and outside assistance from the United Nations, NGOs and regional powers.

Strategic Actions:

Student organizations were at the forefront of the new nonviolent opposition. Student groups such as FARMIDA (Aceh Student Action Front for Reform), SMUR (Student Solidarity for the People), and KARMA (Coalition for Reform Action of Acehnese Students), Flower Aceh, and SIRA (Sentral Informasi Refurendum Aceh) seized the opportunity presented by the weakened and more moderate post-Suharto central government in Jakarta. They created signs, posters, flags, banners and wall paintings denouncing the government and calling for a referendum. They espoused an Islamic, nonviolent strategy for social change later called “Islamic Peaceful Action.” They built movement infrastructure largely led by students, including networks of cooperation and communication throughout rural villages. These networks established local self-defense and self-reliance groups in each village. Many Acehnese turned to these groups rather than the military or police forces to resolve disputes and provide justice. Additionally these local groups were capable of working together to organize at the provincial level. Aceh experienced a surge of nonviolent resistance. Acehnese boycotted the 1999 parliamentary elections that June. Polling officials going from village to village were met with demands for a referendum. Rather than being compelled to vote, thousands of rural villagers avoided confrontation with the military by camping out in urban mosques and schools. The polling was called off within days. In September, student activists, led by SIRA, successfully organized a province-wide strike, shutting down the Acehnese economy and government for two days. In November, a mass rally astounded Indonesia and the Acehnese themselves with hundreds of

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thousands of people of all ages demonstrating for a referendum in the Acehese capital of Banda Aceh. The TNI was ordered by Jakarta to remain in their barracks. The nonviolent public pressure forced the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) to relinquish its claim to being the true government of Aceh, and agreed to support the choice of the people. The discourses of human rights and people's sovereignty became dominant in Aceh. Human rights and other nongovernmental organizations returned and multiplied in Aceh. Women's organizations played a major role in organizing nonviolent resistance, despite repression by the TNI. The Indonesian government finally announced a partial troop withdrawal from Aceh at the end of 1999.

With the advent of a popular nonviolent movement in Aceh, support from foreign governments and NGOs emerged. TAPOL (A UK-based human rights organization focusing on Indonesia), Human Rights Watch, and other human rights groups reported vigorously on events in Aceh in part because of the growth and empowerment of local human rights groups that collected and disseminated information at unprecedented levels. Other human rights groups such as Peace Brigades International provided nonviolent accompaniment. There was an influx of international humanitarian agencies such as Save the Children, Oxfam and others. The US government earmarked 5 million dollars for civil society development in Aceh in the year 2000 and made subsequent appropriations in the years thereafter.

The Acehese diaspora communities were electrified and began organizing. Large Acehese populations in the cities of Jakarta and Medan, as well as communities in Malaysia and other parts of the world, began raising funds and holding educational conferences on Aceh. International solidarity groups began to emerge led by the Support Committee for Human Rights in Aceh (SCHRA). The organization Nonviolence International began providing education and training in nonviolent organizing (called Islamic Peaceful Action) and launched Peace Education Programs in Acehese high schools. Negotiations with the Indonesian government began at the end of 1999. The Henri Dunant Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, a Swiss organization established in 1999, brokered a temporary peace agreement between GAM and the TNI in early 2000. The agreement, titled "A Joint Understanding for Humanitarian Pause," recognized the need for the GAM and TNI to stop fighting while humanitarian aid was distributed. Both the TNI and GAM violated this agreement but it did provide vital political space for the civil

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sector and referendum movement to organize. The agreement reached a breaking point in March of 2001 when the US-based Exxon-Mobil corporation shut down operations at several local natural gas facilities that the GAM had attacked. A lawsuit was subsequently filed in the United States by the International Labor Rights Fund against Exxon-Mobil, accusing it of complicity in human rights abuses perpetrated by the TNI.

Throughout this period SIRA and civil society organizations continued to organize as a third force in Acehnese politics and pushed for an “All Inclusive Dialogue”. As a result, they faced repression, consisting of threats, arrests, beatings, and assassinations, largely from the TNI and Indonesian security forces. Simultaneously, the humanitarian pause provided GAM with an opportunity to consolidate its parallel political structures and institute systematic revenue collection (which critics claim was extortion).

International funders (mostly governments) were generous and intentional in supporting the growth of the civilian nongovernmental organization sector. With the breakdown of the humanitarian pause agreement in 2001, TNI troops re-entered Aceh by the tens of thousands. Some subsequent political agreements were reached to provide Aceh with expanded autonomy and peace zones, but given the core disagreement with Indonesia over the issue of Acehnese independence, war continued with many TNI military successes. It was not until the enormous devastation created by the earthquake and tsunami at the end of 2004 that significant progress was achieved. GAM and the Indonesian government signed a 2005 Peace Accord granting Aceh greater autonomy and control over its natural resources. The Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) was established by the European Union in 2005 to oversee compliance with the peace agreement. Three-hundred monitors from seven nations assisted in the mission until successful local elections were held in 2006.

Ensuing Events:

Violent conflict in Aceh has been reduced enormously as the region now experiences a higher degree of autonomy. The Free Aceh Movement became the Aceh Party and now controls the Acehnese government. SIRA, the major nonviolent resistance organization, achieved short-term electoral success but has since faded. There remains dissatisfaction with the failure of Jakarta to

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fulfill all aspects of the Peace Accord and nonviolent protests on a small scale continue.

Corruption in Aceh remains rampant with the new leaders harvesting the fruit of power. Post tsunami international aid has dropped off dramatically and economic growth is sluggish. Shari'ah law was established in Aceh by the secular Indonesian regime as a means to lessen support for the nationalist GAM movement and its associated political party. Women's groups and other civil society organizations have been nonviolently resisting some of the efforts by conservative religious elements to implement their restrictive social agenda. Indonesian security and intelligence services maintain a strong presence. Despite this, civil society has flourished, with environmental, women's, development, and arts groups being part of the nonviolent aspect of Aceh's struggle for self-determination.

Further Reading:

- <http://www.etan.org/estafeta/01/winter/6aceh.htm>
- <http://acehnet.tripod.com/crow.htm>
- <http://www.counterpunch.org/roosa01122005.html>
- <http://encyclopedia.farlex.com/Aceh+War>
- <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/572060/Suharto>
- <http://www.insideindonesia.org/content/view/433/29/>
- <http://www.asiapacific.ca/analysis/pubs/pdfs/commentary/cac43.pdf>
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/542525.stm>
- <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/11/09/world/world-briefing.html>
- http://books.google.com/books?id=PSP-oS7I7-YC&pg=RA1-PA249&lpg=RA1-PA249&dq=aceh+november+1999&source=bl&ots=U1uEqkqBJF&sig=qGFq9a4hsQqyAui8hgtl_3aOBK0&hl=en&ei=OLTfSs7zGo3gswO7jPjkDw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&ved=0CAoQ6AEwADgK#v=onepage&q=&f=false
- <http://www.conflictanddevelopment.org/data/doc/en/regCaseStudy/aceh/mon/Aceh%20Conflict%20Monitoring%20Update%20-%20March%202007.pdf>

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