

National Integration of Indonesia: Aceh's Experience

A concerned view from the region

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Introduction

The problems of political integration which form the subject of this paper, have a general relevance to the decolonized states of the world. Southeast Asia as a geographic unit is a collection of countries which is vast in extent and contrast in terms of human geography, cultures, languages, and political systems, and its contemporary expression is a product of former patterns of migration and settlement and also of territorial forms imposed and policies pursued by colonial governments. Legitimacy, drawn from the Western idea of self-determination, served to influence the mainstream of nationalism in Asia and also to inspire ethnic nationalist sentiments among ethnic minorities.

In the process of nation building, certain minority groups become anomalies, without the same trust or benefits enjoyed by members of the national majority. This shows that nationality is conceived in the modern nation state as a kind of superethnicity around which a national cultural boundary is created, with minority groups tending to be excluded. Indonesian nationalism, for example, regards Javanism as an essential ingredient, while other minority groups such as the Ambonese, Papuans and Acehnese therefore, are seen as anomalies.

No multi-ethnic state has proven immune to the surge of ethnicity. Authoritarian, democratic, federative, and unitary forms have all been affected. Nor has the proliferation of international organizations and alliances decreased the significance of ethnic nationalism. On the contrary, the post-war international economic and political organizations, which emphasize membership and negotiation among nation states, appear to have encouraged minority communities to think in self-conscious ethnic and nationalistic terms.

No government of a multi-ethnic state has found the solution to the problem posed by the demands for modernization on the one hand and the tendencies of growing ethnic nationalism on the other. Determined to prevent secession and to achieve nationalism by coercive methods, while simultaneously promoting assimilation, such policies have proven remarkably unsuccessful.

Formation of Indonesia

Indonesia is a geographic anomaly, a product of Dutch colonization, bringing together more than 13,000 islands with disparate histories, civilization, cultures and languages.¹ The name of Indonesia itself is derived from 'Indo Nesos' (Indian islands, a name given to the archipelagos by a German writer in the 19th century). To the natives, this archipelago is known as 'Nusantara' (countries in between, referring to its geographical location between the Indian and Pacific Oceans). The Dutch called it 'Indonetic' which comprised the islands 'owned' by VOC, the Dutch East Indies Company.² When the VOC went bankrupt, having offered big dividends to its shareholders for decades by borrowing money from the Dutch government, Indonetic was taken over by the Dutch government and became its colony.

Indonesia only gained its national identity in the fight against Dutch colonialism. Soeharto, to a much greater extent than his predecessor, Soekarno, was careful to shape this national identity. As those memories of shared struggle fade, however, more parochial identities in the form of 'ethnic nationalism' have come to the fore. Ethnic and religious controversies, particularly the reciprocal killings between local Christian and Muslim communities in Ambon (the Moluccas islands) have put an end to their harmonious co-existence. In Irian Jaya (or West Papua) and in East Kalimantan (Borneo island), several communal disorders impair the central government's ability to maintain control and manage peaceful transition to a more democratic political culture. Shots from the independent movement are heard in the oil-rich province of Aceh, while discontent is now seen in Sulawesi (Celebes).

This rapid escalation of civil unrest following the fall of Soeharto is accompanied by a profound economic crisis, condemning the majority of Indonesia's 210 million people to poverty and deprivation. There are signs of a

¹ Diane K. Mauzy, ed., 1984, *Politics in ASEAN States*. Kuala Lumpur: Maricans Academic Series, pp. 9-10.

² Tengku Hasan M. di Tiro, 1964, *The Political Future of the Indonesian Archipelago*. New York: Unpublished Material, p.5.

split within the Indonesian military (TNI), with certain elements exploiting the situation in different provinces to ensure the continued ascendancy of entrenched military authority along with its old repressive habits. Until recently, the international community paid scant attention to the tragic situation of Aceh/Sumatra – the strategic and resource-rich 'Special Territory' in the north of Sumatra island.

Background to Aceh's Political History

Aceh is one of the oldest independent nations in Southeast Asian history, and according to M. C. Ricklets 'Aceh was emerging as a major power, the most powerful, wealthy and cultivated modern state of the area'³. Aceh's population at present is around 4.2 million and the population of the island of Sumatra, which is regarded as the sixth longest island in the world, is around 20 million in an area of 182,828 sq miles. Today, Aceh/Sumatra is the world's largest producer of natural gas (over one million cubic meters a day) and petroleum (over 1.5 million barrels a day). Aceh also produces natural rubber, coffee, tobacco, timber, tin, gold, platinum, steel, paper, cement, bauxite, rice and sugar.⁴

Aceh's history is told largely in terms of trade. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the Aceh Sultanate was one of the most powerful trading states in Southeast Asia. A French traveller of the period provided an apt observation: 'All people in the India or on the other side (of) the Cape of Good Hope, when they would go to Sumatra, merely say they are going to Aceh, for the city and port has acquired all the names and reputation of the island.'⁵

Before it was united into a single state as part of the reaction to the Portuguese intrusion, the Sultanate of Aceh Darussalam was the site of several kingdoms, such as the kingdom of Peureulak, the kingdom of Samudra Pase, the kingdom of Beunua (Temiang), the kingdom of Lingge, the kingdom of Pidie (Pedier), the kingdom of Jaya, the kingdom of Daya, the kingdom of Aru, and the kingdom of Aceh.⁶

³ M.C. Ricklets, 1981, *A History of Modern Indonesia*. Bloomington: Indiana State University Press, p.335.

⁴ Tengku Hasan M. di Tiro, 1994, *Speech delivered before the United Nations Sub-Commission for Human Rights*. Geneva: Palais des Nations.

⁵ Albert Gray, tr & ed, 1887–1890, *The Voyage of Francois Pyrand to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*. London: Cambridge University Press, vol. 2, part 1, pp. 159–160.

⁶ Lukman Thaib, 2000, *The Roots of the Acehnese Struggle*. Kuala Lumpur: Syabab Media, p. 4.

The Sultanate of Aceh attained its political greatness both internally and externally in the early seventeenth century under the brilliant Sultan Iskandar Muda (1607–1636). It was said that in that period royal control prevailed over both domestic and foreign traders in all the important ports of the west coast of Sumatra as well as on the east coast of the Malayan Peninsula.⁷ Iskandar Muda's wealthy court was a center of scholarship unrivalled in Southeast Asia in general and the Malay world in particular.

La Grande Encyclopédie (Paris, 1874) states: 'In 1582, the Acehnese had already extended their preponderance over the island of the Sundas, over one part of the Malay Peninsular, and had relations with all the nations trafficking the Indian Ocean from Japan to Arabia. The history of the long struggle which the Acehnese sustained against the Portuguese who were established in Malacca from the beginning of the sixteenth century was no less a glorious page in the history of the Acehnese people. In 1586, one of their Sultans attacked the Portuguese in Malacca with an armada of 500 warships and 60,000 marines.'⁸

Three hundred years after the Dutch occupied Java, Aceh was still an internationally recognized independent sovereign state with diplomatic and treaty relations with the rest of the world, including Great Britain. Britain had treaty and commercial relations with Aceh from 1603, and in 1819, in consideration of the long and uninterrupted peace, amity and understanding which had existed between the East India Company and the Kings of Aceh, it was agreed by Sir Stamford Raffles on behalf of the Governor General of India that: 'There shall be a perpetual peace, friendship and defensive Alliance between the states, dominions and subjects of the High Contracting Parties, neither of whom shall give any aid or assistance to the enemies of the other.' At that time Aceh was emerging as a major power, the most powerful, wealthy, and cultivated state of the area.⁹

On March 26, 1873, after two and a half centuries of colonizing Java, the Dutch issued a formal declaration of war against the State of Aceh¹⁰, thus acknowledging Aceh's status as an independent sovereign state. Many states, including the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, Austro-Hungary reacted with declarations of neutrality. The American President at the time, General Ulysses S. Grant, rejected Holland's request for the

⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

⁸ Tengku Hasan M. di Tiro, 1992, *A Memorandum of Aceh: A New Birth of Freedom*. London: House of Lords, p. 5.

⁹ Thaib, *The Roots of the Acehnese*, op.cit., p. 11. See also Ricklets, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, op.cit., p. 335.

¹⁰ "Proclamatie", cited in: *Voice for the Independence of Aceh (Majallah Suara Aceh Merdeka)*. London: August, 1994, p. 5.

United States to take Holland's side in the conflict, while the Ottoman empire expressed solidarity with Aceh, making preparations for a possible Turkish intervention on the Acehnese side.¹¹ These declarations of neutrality constituted sufficient proof of Aceh's status as a bonafide universally recognized independent sovereign state.

Historical Survey of Aceh's Integration with Indonesia

Countries that attained political independence after the Second World War have been affected by the phenomenon of ethnic pluralism (multi-ethnicity). This ethnic pluralism is largely the result of the redrawing of boundary lines of the newly independent nations. There are different types of multi-ethnic situations, one of which arises when a sovereign state or autonomous community has been incorporated into a country by the official regime. An excellent modern example of this is the case of Aceh which was forcibly incorporated with the smaller island of Java-Indonesia.

It is rather ironic that Aceh was annexed to Java-Indonesia at a time when colonialism was supposed to have been outlawed and liquidated, when the right of self-determination of peoples was supposed to have been guaranteed, and when the United Nations Decolonization Commission had been established for the purpose of presiding over the decolonization of all colonies.

Perhaps the most critical event explaining the attitude of many Acehnese with regard to the integration of Aceh with Indonesia is the signing of the 'Round Table Conference Agreement' between Holland and Indonesia on December 27, 1949.¹² The agreement provides for transfer of sovereignty between the territory of the Dutch East Indies and a fully independent Indonesia. Since the signing of the agreement between the two parties, the Dutch East Indies ceased to exist and became the Republic of Indonesia when it joined the United Nations. The Kingdom of Aceh Darussalam was included in the agreement without its consent or any kind of referendum, and despite not having been formally incorporated into the Dutch colonial possession.¹³ Subsequently, the Indonesian government used armed troops to annex Aceh. Since annexation, the Acehnese have continued to resent what they consider as foreign occupation.

¹¹ Tengku Hasan, *A Memorandum of Aceh*, op.cit., p. 5.

¹² US Committee for Refugees, 1998, *The Least Risky Solution*. Washington D.C.: US Committee for Refugees, p. 4.

¹³ Lukman Thaib, *Indonesia's Future Integration*, Paper Presented at the International Workshop on New Dimensions of Conflict and Challenges for Conflict Management in Southeast Asia, P. Pinang, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 5-9 December, 1999, p. 3.

The most outrageous aspect of all is the fact that when Holland so acted, it was not even in control of Aceh, having been chased out of Aceh in March 1942! The Dutch returned to re-occupy Java and islands of the East Indies after World War II, but they did not manage to reoccupy Aceh! Thus, Holland did not have de jure or de facto power over Aceh. So it was mere pretence when Holland 'gave' her 'sovereignty' over Aceh to the so called 'Republic of Indonesia', *Nemo dat quod non habet* (No one gives what he does not have).

The Acehnese totally reject the notion of the 'Indonesian Nation' on historical, cultural, sociological, anthropological, economic and political grounds. As Dr. Henry Kissinger, the former US Secretary of State has correctly written: 'Indonesia was nothing but a geographic expression until the Dutch found out it was more efficient to unite the islands of the Indies under a single administration.'¹⁴ It is thus very clear that the 'Round Table Agreement' between Holland and Indonesia violated every principle of decolonization and all major UN General Assembly resolutions against colonialism.

The UN Charter absolutely prohibits the forcible acquisition of other countries, for which reason the US and UK rightly refused to recognize the legality of the annexations of the Baltic states in 1940 by the former Soviet Union. By exactly the same reasoning, the Dutch annexation of Aceh was unlawful¹⁵, and the Dutch had no power to hand over to Indonesia territory which was not theirs.

The Acehnese realized very well what had happened to them. For that reason they refused to participate in Indonesia's last general election on June 7, 1999. According to them, they cannot become independent by participating in these elections, as the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in October 1975, in line with the UN General Assembly Resolution 1514 on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, had decided that for a colonized territory such as Aceh to become independent, it must go through one of the following steps: 1. Become a sovereign independent state. 2. Associate of its own free will with an existing independent state. 3. Integrate freely with an existing independent state.

Regarding points 2 and 3 above, there has been neither 'free integration' nor 'free association' between Aceh and Indonesia. The people of Aceh have never been given any free choice either by the Dutch or Indonesia.

¹⁴ Quoted from Tengku Hasan, M. di Tiro, 1981: *The Price of Freedom: The Unfinished Diary*. Sweden: ASNLF Information Department, p. 138-139

¹⁵ Lord Avebury, 1991, *Problem of Self-Determination in the Muslim World*. London: House of Lords.

Aceh Darussalam was transferred by the Dutch to Indonesia without plebiscite, direct ballot, or any kind of referendum.

If the concept and method of decolonization 'Indonesian style' had been applied to all other colonial territories in the world, there would be no Third world majority at the United Nations and no UN General Assembly Resolution 2625-XXV that guarantees separate judicial status for all colonial territories. A different world is conjured up by the very name of 'Indonesia'. Fortunately, the rest of the world has escaped the process of 'Indonesianization'.

What is meant elsewhere by decolonization means re-colonization in 'Indonesia'. When people in Africa nowadays refer to the 'colonial boundaries' which are recognized by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) as legitimate boundaries, they are referring to 'colonial boundaries after a proper process of decolonization' when Africa was re-divided into some fifty two independent, sovereign, national states. The Dutch colonial empire of 'Indonesia' has never been decolonized as the British, Portuguese, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Belgian colonies in Africa or elsewhere in the world have been.

There has never been any change of boundaries in the Dutch colonial empire of 'Indonesia' from the 17th century to the present day! The same old colonial boundaries are maintained intact today under cover of the name of 'Indonesia'. None of the peoples in the entire region of the former Dutch East Indies alias 'Indonesia' which is in length equal to the distance from Lisbon to Moscow and in breadth to the distance between Rome and Oslo, containing many nationalities whose independence was usurped by the Dutch colonialists, have regained independence as did the colonial peoples in Africa, Latin America, and other parts of Asia.

What the Dutch have managed to do with the support of other Western powers (democracies if you will) is to keep their colonial empire intact as a neo-colony and to get the pliable natives of the island of Java to run it for them, under the name of the nation of 'Indonesia'. No plebiscite, or any kind of referendum had even been held to determine whether the peoples of Aceh, Sumatra, Borneo, the Papuas, the Celebes and the Moluccas and others wanted to be part of 'Indonesia' or not. This is how Aceh was integrated into 'Indonesia'.

The Emergence of the Aceh/Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF)

Although the process of integration of Aceh into Indonesia as recorded in the 'Round Table Agreement' resulted in Aceh being regarded as part of Indonesia, the desire for 'an independent democratic state' did not die. On December 4, 1976 through a 'Redeclaration of Independence' in the spirit of the American Declaration of Independence, the ASNLF was founded.¹⁶ The movement is headed by Tengku Hasan M. di Tiro.

The legal principle for the existence of ASNLF was the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2625-XXV which from 12th August 1970 was constituted as a part of International Law regarding decolonization. The Resolution stated: 'All colonial territories have judicial status that is separate and distinct from the colonialist country, and this separate judicial status remains as long as the people of each of these colonial territories have not yet exercised their right of self-determination.'¹⁷

Thus, the emergence of ASNLF is indeed a genuine attempt to fulfil the historic and democratic quest of the Acehnese who have been colonized under Indonesian hegemony. From the perspective of International Law and Convention, the struggle of the Acehnese is in keeping with the right of self-determination, as the United Nations affirmed: 'It is widely accepted that a group of people that is presently subjected to military occupation that traditionally had formed a nation of its own and had been a part of a different nation than the one which occupies it, is entitled to assert or to restore its self-determination.'¹⁸

In general, since its formation, the ASNLF has withstood the worst assault by the Indonesian forces, as a result, the Indonesian government designated Aceh as a Military Operation Area (DOM) in 1990, which provided the army 'a free rein to crush the rebellion', as the then military commander of North Sumatra then, General Pramono, said in his own words: 'I have instructed people to carry weapons, machetes or whatever they have. If you see ASNLF activists, just kill them.'¹⁹

As a result, according to the 'European Parliament Report' No. B 30320/91, 5000 Acehnese were massacred in military operations between

¹⁶ Tengku Hasan, *The Price of Freedom*, op.cit., p. 139.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ United Nations, 1990, Unesco Document 23, Para. 24. Geneva: Palais des Nations.

¹⁹ *Tempo* (Jakarta, 17th July 1990).

1989 to 1991.²⁰ The continuation of military operations in some areas of Aceh up to the present day has resulted in an increase of human rights abuses and damaged the peace of the community. The coming of the Indonesian army (TNI) and the Indonesian Police Force (PPRM), altogether around 40,000 personnel has made the Acehnese people in almost every regency, flee as refugees to areas that are considered peaceful.

In the wake of this latest atrocity, there have been growing calls in Aceh for it to separate from the 'Republic of Indonesia' by means of referendum, bearing in mind that the Acehnese people have experienced one tragedy after another over the past ten years while members of the armed forces enjoy immunity from prosecution.

In response to the deepening sense of frustration in Aceh, described as a potential for rising violence and escalation of social unrest which can lead to an increasing mistrust of the central government in Jakarta, the Indonesian government signed the 'Three Months Ceasefire' with the ASNLF on May 12, 2000 in Switzerland. This agreement, which took effect from June 2, 2000, seeks to end more than two decades of violence in the province of Aceh.²¹ The ceasefire was initiated by the Henry Dunant Centre for Promotion of Human Rights in Geneva. The Indonesian government was represented by its permanent envoy to the United Nations, Dr. Hassan Wirayuda, while the Free Aceh Movement was represented by its Health Minister Dr. Zaini Abdullah.²²

In more specific terms the ceasefire called for 'an absence of military operations through the setting up of two committees, 'The Committee for Security Modalities' and 'The Committee on Humanitarian Affairs'. However, due to the lack of classification by the 'The Joint Committee for Security Modalities' as to who are really authorized to legitimize the presence of soldiers in the field, the ceasefire could not function properly and the Indonesian military still carried on their operations in almost all Acehnese villages.

According to the Indonesian government, this ceasefire or 'Joint Understanding' is only the first step of a hundred step journey in the effort to find a final solution to the 'Aceh Problem'. Although Wirayuda said that 'there was no question of a troop withdrawal', he also refused to answer a question on 'whether Indonesia was ruling out independence for the Aceh prov-

²⁰ Lukman Thaib, 1997, *The Politics and Government of Southeast Asia*. Kuala Lumpur: Golden Books Center Sdn. Bhd., p. 35.

²¹ *New Straits Times* (Kuala Lumpur, 13th May 2000).

²² *Ibid.*

ince'.²³ However, if the government is serious about bringing peace to the territory, the initiative must be accompanied by the immediate withdrawal of troops and the ending of impunity.

In its statement from its main office in Sweden the Free Aceh Movement (ASNLF) declared that 'the meeting in Geneva to stop violence in Aceh does not mean the ASNLF is becoming weaker in its struggle for the independence of Aceh. The movement's commitments to achieve its solemn goal remains intact until Aceh gains its independence.'²⁴

The Acehnese see the accord as a result of the efforts of Tgk Hasan M. di Tiro in his diplomatic tour to the United States, United Kingdom, and other European countries and finally to the headquarters of the United Nations in New York in early 2000. At the same time, the accord could also be regarded as a response to the repeated demands by human rights NGOs and student organizations in Aceh for the two sides engaged in armed operations to lay down their arms and put an end to the violence.

The international policy makers regarded the accord as politically courageous on both sides and called on the two sides to agree to a cease fire as a first step towards entering into negotiations to find a peaceful solution to the crisis in Aceh. But peace cannot be achieved without justice.

The Indonesian government should recognize that the Acehnese people have suffered systematic human rights violations for more than ten years from the Indonesian armed forces, in the course of which thousands of lives have been lost. Impunity will end only when those responsible for these and other crimes are brought before a credible independent tribunal capable of trying violations of human rights under international humanitarian law.

The Future Form of Indonesia's Integration

Considering the escalation of serious conflict all over Indonesia, and in the interest of freedom of expression and the process of democratization in the country, the Indonesian government should use the army (TNI) for peace-making processes and confidence-building instead of quelling the referendum campaign in Aceh with violence. The Indonesian government should accommodate a new road to freedom for the people of Aceh. The Acehnese need to be given a chance to decide what kind of integration they want with

²³ *The Sun* (Kuala Lumpur, 13th May 2000).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Indonesia as declared in the proposed resolution at the ECOSOC Council of the United Nations No:E/CN.4/Sub.2/1994/L.25, on August 18, 1994.

This new road cannot be other than the road to legitimate 'self-determination' through democratic mechanisms such as referendum or direct ballot, whether the Acehnese want to be integrated or remain a part of the 'Indonesian Republic' in the form of a 'Loose Indonesian Confederation (LIC)' or whether they want to be an independent state in the form of a 'Commonwealth Independent State of Indonesia (CISI)' or a 'Confederation of Aceh Sumatra (CAS)'.

The restoration of territorial sovereignty over Aceh to the Acehnese, over Sumatra to the Sumatrans, and over Javanese territory to the Javanese, is an act of justice too long denied. This is the only way to secure peace, security and harmony in this vast region hitherto drawn into endless anarchy, lawlessness, oppression and injustice, caused by incessant rebellions against Indonesia on the one hand, and by Indonesia's cruel suppression of these peoples on the other.

Through this act of justice, the most important source of conflict, that of the people of one country trying to lord it over another, will be removed. Once peace and security are restored, the road to development and progress, which has been blocked for many decades, will be wide open. The problems of administration will have been reduced to a manageable size, and economic planning will be made possible and practicable.