

RSIS SEMINAR NOTES

RSIS Seminar on Aceh: A Post-Election Analysis

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Introduction

Dr. Irman G. Lanti is currently a Programme Manager for the UNDP's Indonesia's Governance Unit and in that capacity helped devise voter education programmes and observed the local elections held in December 2006 in Aceh. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of British Columbia. He is a member of the Board of Governors of the Jakarta-based Centre for Information and Development Studies (CIDES), and has also held visiting appointments at both RSIS and ISEAS. He also served as a Senior Fellow at the Indonesian Institute.

Seminar Speech

Dr. Lanti said that the local elections held in Aceh on 11 December 2006 was a test for success of peace process in the world. He dwelt into the history of Aceh conflict, saying that the conflict dates back to the independence of Indonesia in 1945. Aceh was later on part of the larger movement of Darul Islam that also took place in Java and other parts of Indonesia in 1950s. The movement was aimed at establishing an Islamic state in Indonesia. However, it never advocated independence for Aceh or for any of its other strongholds. The Darul Islam movement disintegrated in Aceh when its leaders were co-opted into government and Aceh was given special provincial status.

From the 1960s, Aceh entered into a period of relative peace. However, in 1976 during the Suharto era, Hasan di Tiro and a small number of supporters proclaimed Aceh's independence. Unlike the previous struggle of Aceh that was Islamic in character, the present movement was nationalist and separatist in texture. Di Tiro established the Aceh/Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF), which was later known as *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* (GAM or Free Aceh Movement).

The Suharto government came out with a very heavy-handed approach to deal with this secessionist movement, and Aceh was turned into a military operation zone area. There were many reports of human rights abuses and thousands of civilians were killed in the Aceh. After the fall of Suharto in 1998, the movement was scrapped and a series of peace negotiations started. However, they failed to achieve any result. In 2002, the signing of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement (COHA) was signed between the two parties. However, it did not materialize and Aceh fell into violence once more. President Habibie tried to introduce Sharia in Aceh as an alternative, but it couldn't work as well.

Further efforts during the time of Abdurrahman Wahid as well as Megawati failed, and the Indonesian government imposed martial law in this province in May 2003. A major military offensive was launched to liquidate this movement but the military achieved limited success. However, the tsunami that struck Aceh in December 2004 greatly helped in bringing both the sides to more serious talks.

A peace accord was finally signed between the Government of Indonesia and GAM on 15 August 2005, mainly due to the facilitation and mediation offered by former Finnish President, Martti Ahtissari, of the Crisis Management Initiative.

The salient provisions of the peace accord related to the GAM abandoning its demands for independence, surrendering the weapons and disbanding its armed wing. The Indonesian government agreed to withdraw its military and police forces located in Aceh, granting of amnesty to GAM fighters and prisoners, and passing the required legislation for granting the special autonomy measures to this province.

On the eve of the first direct election in the province in December 2006, with GAM expected to come up as a strong political party, a rift in the organization occurred which weakened the very strength achieved by this long struggle. The rift was between GAM leaders mostly of the older lot who have been in exile, and the younger rebels who have been fighting for the cause in Aceh. This resulted in two sets of candidates for the Governor and the Deputy Governor and hence one set had to contest as independents. The central government and the national parties tried to cash on this rift in furthering their own political aims.

On 30 December 2006, Irwandy Yusuf, a former GAM rebel and a political prisoner was declared elected as governor and his running mate Muhammad Nazar, a pro independence activist as deputy governor. This combination won with 38.20 % of the votes polled and hence there was no necessity for a run-off election between the leading candidates. Humam Hamid, who was contesting against Irwandi for the post of Governor, garnered only 17% of the votes. The results clearly indicated that Aceh had abandoned all recognized political parties in preference for GAM. It also indicated that Aceh does not encourage candidates that are perceived to be close to Indonesian government.

The voting patterns were also surprising. Irwandi won from areas which were non-GAM areas as well, where as he attained significant majority from GAM areas in Aceh.

Unlike the earlier peace deals that had failed in the initial stages of implementation, the present one signed in August 2005 has so far lasted and has progressed smoothly, resulting in the disarming of the rebels, withdrawal of the military and police forces and holding of the first direct elections.

As of now, the central government seems to be keen in fulfilling most of its commitments to the peace deal. If this trend continues and there is cooperation between the new Aceh leadership and the centre, there is every reason for peace to last in the province.

The fact that more than 75 % of Aceh's 2.6 million voters came to cast their votes in the elections was a clear indication that the general public is fully committed to make the peace process work.

The intervening period between now and the elections for the local legislature in 2009 is crucial in that the teething problems between the new leadership and the centre on the one hand and between the leadership and the general public and disgruntled elements on the other, are likely to surface and has to be amicably settled.

Conclusion

With the popularity, support and trust gained by GAM during this election, it should not revive its demand for independence. This will jeopardise the peace process. The Indonesian Government should also have no apprehensions regarding the GAM being at the helm of affairs in Aceh. It should give the new leadership a chance for the province to bounce back from the after effects of the Tsunami and the long-drawn civil war which could not be settled militarily.

Discussion

On the point of Aceh going the East Timor way, he said that it has so far not taken such a path, and the Government has to go all out to sustain this peace. As promised by Irwandi in his post-election interviews, priority has to be accorded for improving the economic welfare of the province, particularly the poor, improving the infrastructure and speeding up the reconstruction work (for all the damages caused by Tsunami). There are also some challenges like integration of GAM fighters and prisoners into the main stream, lack of skilled labour and lack of employment opportunities.

To another question, Mr. Lanti said that the animosity between GAM and the security forces is deep rooted. Now that the GAM will be governing the province, the Indonesian Military may have to get over their past differences and help in establishing a better rapport. He said that some sections of the body politic and the military are demanding the dissolution of GAM as proof of their loyalty. At this juncture this may be asking for too much, as it is a difficult task for an armed insurgency group to transform itself rapidly into a political party, and interact with the very government it had opposed all along.

About the prospects of the future of the peace process in the post-election scenario, Mr. Lanti said that GAM and the people of Aceh have much to gain from this deal as it has given them special autonomy, the right to form a local political party and a bigger share of the revenues generated from the province. The Indonesian government has also produced a viable solution for this civil war which has lasted for three decades without prejudice to its sovereignty. According to him, this may perhaps be the best chance for long lasting peace and to usher in a new era in Aceh.