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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Aceh's new Cultural Leader: Former separatist now guardian of state**

By Mushahid Ali

### **Synopsis**

*Former Aceh separatist leader Malik Mahmud has become Wali Nanggroe (guardian of state). How will he reconcile Aceh's push for its own identity with being part of the Indonesian republic?*

### **Commentary**

INDONESIA'S AUTONOMOUS province Aceh has installed as its "Wali Nanggroe" or Guardian of State a former separatist leader Malik Mahmud Al Haythar. The 72-year old Malik, former prime minister of the now disbanded Free Aceh Movement (GAM), was sworn in at the provincial legislature or DPRA in the presence of over 1000 guests, mostly officials. In doing so, Aceh has taken a big step towards establishing its special identity within the Indonesian republic.

Indonesia's state administrative minister, the Aceh police chief and provincial military commander were in attendance, reported the *Jakarta Globe*, quoting local media. The legislative speaker Hasbi Abdullah, who officiated at the inauguration, described it as "a very touching, heroic moment" because they were installing the Wali Nanggroe "to keep us connected with our past tradition."

In his inaugural speech the Singapore-born Malik cited the challenges he saw for the province including economic and social disparities among the people and the threat of globalisation to local culture. He pledged to work to improve education in the province, saying "we need a revolution in education in line with the ongoing transformation of knowledge in Aceh." Malik wants education to support a culture of innovation and creativity in the management of human resources, to allow Acehnese children to develop the capacity to compete and create jobs as well as to develop Acehnese culture and make it part of the world's culture.

### **Wali Nanggroe as cultural leader**

The appointment of the Wali Nanggroe was set in motion last year under the terms of a bylaw that defined the Wali as a "cultural leader" who will unite the people, independent and dignified, with an authority to educate and oversee the work of cultural institutions, the use of (traditional) languages and the organisation of traditional ceremonies.

The bylaw was modified after the central government rejected an earlier version that would have granted the Wali Nanggroe supreme authority in the province, including the power to overrule the provincial legislature and

president of Indonesia. The legislature has argued that the bylaw was a mandate of the Helsinki Agreement, signed by GAM and the Indonesian government in 2005 to end the decades of insurgency in Indonesia's westernmost province, where a local version of Sharia law is now enforced.

Malik, who was reportedly one of GAM's main negotiators in Helsinki, was unofficially named the ninth Wali Nanggroe by former GAM members, replacing former leader Hasan Tiro who died in 2010. The office of the Wali Nanggroe is a tradition that dates back to the Dutch colonial era.

As Wali Nanggroe Malik will oversee a new bureaucracy set up to safeguard Acehese culture and values. Some critics have said his authority in the province will approach that of a monarch. There have been protests in a number of regions against Malik's appointment.

### **Aceh's GAM flag challenge**

Meanwhile an ongoing dispute over Aceh's proposed flag came to a head last Monday, as thousands of local residents surrounded an Indonesian military compound after soldiers confiscated dozens of star and crescent flags during celebration of the new Wali's inauguration. The crowd was travelling in convoy from the Aceh legislature to the Aceh Raya mosque in Bandar Aceh when the seizure occurred.

The crowd changed course for the local military (TNI Kodim) compound in Aceh Besar, outside the provincial capital. They gathered outside the military compound throwing stones and briefly held a passing police officer captive, undeterred by warning shots. The soldiers eventually returned the flags but some members of the crowd remained and the siege continued. Additional security personnel, both military and police, have been despatched to the location to keep the peace.

The DPRA had adopted a resolution in March that made the banner of the disbanded GAM the province's official flag, putting Partai Aceh at direct odds with the central government. The DPRA, many of whose members are former GAM rebels, have held firm to its decision to make the star and crescent banner Aceh's official flag but the central government has insisted that the flag violates a law banning separatist symbols.

The push to adopt the GAM flag presents the new Wali Nanggroe with his first challenge to reconcile Aceh's provincial autonomy with the unity of the Indonesian republic.

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