

Whither Aceh?

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ABSTRACT Aceh is known as not only a rich but also a rebellious region. It experienced one of the longest wars against the Dutch colonial government. The seeds of conflict with the Indonesian government were sown early on during the independence period in the 1940s and 1950s. During the Suharto period (1966–98) Aceh developed from being a poor province to being the fastest growing provincial economy in Indonesia. However, the Acehnese believe that they did not gain much from this economic growth. This fuelled anti-Jakarta feeling among the Acehnese and also increased the popularity of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) in Aceh. The military solution that the Suharto government imposed in the late 1980s worsened the human rights conditions in Aceh. As both the Habibie and Abudurrahman Wahid governments have failed to end the conflict, many Acehnese have been calling for a referendum to decide the future of the province: whether to remain part of Indonesia or to be an independent state.

Until recently, for many outside Indonesia, Aceh was a place about which perhaps nothing was known. Now, because Aceh has recently attracted the attention of the international media, many have heard the name, and perhaps link it in their mind with East Timor. Like East Timor Aceh experienced many years of suffering during the Suharto era. This article is an attempt to understand the continuing conflict in Aceh and its uncertain future. It poses several important questions. Who are the main parties involved in the conflict? Who were responsible for the human rights violations during and after the Suharto period? Why does Aceh feel it has a claim to independence from Indonesia?

Historical background

Aceh is strategically located on the northern tip of the island of Sumatra, between the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca. Before the Dutch colonial government defeated the Acehnese in 1903, Aceh was an independent political entity. For centuries it had been governed by a succession of sultans. Sultan Ali Mughayat Syah was the founder of the kingdom of Aceh Darussalam in the 16th century.¹ During the rule of Sultan Iskandar Muda in the 19th century, Aceh experienced both political and economic progress. It became one of the most important trading centres in Southeast Asia, controlling major ports throughout North Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula.² After this, however, Aceh's power

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gradually declined, as a result of both internal conflict and rivalry between the British and Dutch colonial powers for control of its rich resources.

Aceh has a strong religious identity in Islam. Islam came to Aceh in the 13th century, brought by Muslim traders from the Middle East and India, before the arrival of Europeans in the region.³ Islam has influenced the course of social and political change in Aceh, providing a rallying point around which the Acehnese have been able to unite against the incursion of foreigners and outsiders. In addition, Aceh has experienced one of the longest wars in the region. In 1873 the Dutch invaded Aceh, beginning the Acehnese War, which lasted until 1903.⁴ This war claimed tens of thousands of lives on both sides. It also changed Acehnese society. Two important pillars of its society, the traditional nobility (*uleebalang*) and the religious leaders (*ulama*) played a crucial role in the course of these changes. The traditional nobility entered an alliance with the Dutch, which enabled colonial power to be established, while the religious leaders fostered anti-colonial sentiment among the Acehnese people. In 1939 the religious leaders formed an Islamic reformist organisation, the All-Aceh Ulama Association (Persatuan Ulama-ulama Seluruh Aceh or PUSA).⁵ A prominent leader of PUSA was Teungku M Daud Beureu'eh from Pidie, who later became an important figure in the revolution against Dutch rule in Aceh. Under his leadership PUSA became a significant organisation, particularly during the Japanese occupation period.

Like the Dutch, the Japanese governed through the traditional nobility from 1942 until 1945.⁶ When the Japanese were defeated, social revolution broke out between the national nobility, who supported the return of the Dutch, and the pro-independence religious leaders. The roots of this division between Aceh's leaders lay in long-standing battles for the control of land, the judiciary and administrative authority, which had begun during the Aceh War and become entrenched during the years of colonisation. During the period of social revolution leading members of the traditional nobility and their families were killed or imprisoned by pro-independence forces led by the religious leaders, creating a new social structure in Aceh based on unity in Islam under the leadership of the religious leaders.⁷

These are the early historical keys to the feeling among Acehnese that their status is different from that of Indonesia's other provinces. First, Aceh resisted colonisation for longer than almost any other part of Indonesia, and the period during which Aceh was eventually colonised was very short. Second, the social revolution of December 1945–March 1946 permanently changed the social structure of Aceh, setting it apart from the rest of the nation on the grounds of religion and class. When in the early years of independence the national leaders of Indonesia were to argue about whether or not Indonesia should become an Islamic state, in Aceh the population was already united under Islam. Social revolution did not take place in the same extent in other parts of Indonesia, where the independence leaders were drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of the Dutch-speaking and Dutch-educated traditional nobility. Third, during the revolution for independence the Dutch left Aceh alone, and Aceh regarded itself initially as having returned to its pre-colonial independent status. However, in 1947 President Sukarno persuaded Aceh to join the Republic of Indonesia,

promising that Aceh would be given autonomy within Indonesia, and allowed to implement Islamic law. Fourth, on the basis of these promises, Aceh made substantial contributions to the young republic. It financed the purchase of Indonesia's first aircraft, funded the establishment of diplomatic outposts in Singapore, India and the United Nations, and contributed generously to the Indonesian government coffers at a time when the new republic was almost bankrupt.⁸

The seeds of conflict with Jakarta were sown early on, as the promises made by President Sukarno were broken. Aceh was incorporated into North Sumatra province, instead of being made a province in its own right, and there was serious disagreement between the leaders of Aceh and of the republic as a whole over the status of Islam in the new nation. In 1953 the Acehneve governor, Teungku M Daud Beureu'eh, launched a rebellion against Jakarta and declared Aceh an Islamic state. Jakarta sent troops to suppress the rebellion. The conflict that ensued lasted until 1957, with heavy casualties on both sides. Unable to suppress the rebellion, President Sukarno gave Aceh separate province status in 1959. Two years later it was given 'special region' (*Daerah Istimewa*) status, and promised autonomy in the areas of religion, customary law and education. In 1962 Teungku M Daud Beureu'eh gave up his rebellion against the Indonesian government. Since then Aceh's relationship with Jakarta has remained fraught with difficulty.

Aceh under Suharto's 'New Order' government

Three important political and economic issues contributed to the deterioration of the relationship between Aceh and the Indonesian government during the New Order period: economic exploitation, ongoing rivalry in Aceh between the religious leaders and the traditional nobility, and the rapid political and economic changes which took place in Indonesia during the New Order period.

Economic exploitation

From the mid-1970s until the 1980s Aceh developed from being of little economic consequence to being the fastest growing provincial economy in Indonesia. The discovery of huge deposits of liquid natural gas and oil in the areas of Lhokseumawe and Lhoksukon was the catalyst for this. As a result, during the 1980s Aceh contributed between US\$2 and \$3 billion annually to Indonesian national revenue. It was the fourth largest contributor after the provinces of Riau (near Singapore), West Papua and East Kalimantan.⁹

There is irrefutable evidence that the Acehnese themselves, however, did not benefit from the wealth, which was siphoned back to Jakarta.¹⁰ Aceh only received about \$82 million annually from Jakarta to fund its own economic development activities.¹¹ Given its wealth of natural resources, Aceh could be a prosperous region similar to the small but wealthy kingdoms of Kuwait and Brunei, but it remains, instead, one of Indonesia's less-developed provinces. The oil and gas companies which are operating in Aceh (such as Indonesia's Pertamina, and the multinational Mobil Oil) have employed very few local

Acehnese, filling most of their posts with people from Java and other regions.¹² Opportunities for Acehnese businesspeople to obtain lucrative contracts to build infrastructure in Aceh have also been few, thanks to the preferential treatment given to other businesspeople who have strong connections with powerful political or military elites in Jakarta.¹³

Conflict between the traditional nobility and the religious scholars

In order to maintain tight control over affairs in Aceh, and indeed in every province of Indonesia, Suharto's New Order government established a centralist political system in which all decision making took place in Jakarta. The result of this bureaucratic focus on Jakarta was that the historical division between the traditional nobility and the religious scholars widened. During the 1970s and 1980s two of Indonesia's political parties fought a bitter contest for political ascendancy in Aceh. Indonesia's ruling party, Golkar, aligned itself with the traditional nobility; the religious leaders joined the Development Unity Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP), a coalition of Islamic-based political parties.

Economic and political change

From 1971 until 1982 the PPP maintained a lead over Golkar, winning each general election in Aceh. But in the 1987 elections it was Golkar that emerged victorious. This reflected the rapid economic and political change that had taken place in the previous decade. As increasing numbers of non-Acehnese moved or were transmigrated to Aceh during the 1970s and 1980s, the political and moral authority of both the traditional nobility and the religious leaders in Aceh gradually decreased. New types of leaders emerged in the bureaucracy, business and the universities.¹⁴ The emergence of these new leaders, who were perceived as serving the interests of Jakarta over those of Aceh, increased the level of resentment among the Acehnese towards the Indonesian government.¹⁵ The defeat of the PPP in 1987 gave rise to a significant feeling of loss among the Acehnese. Islam had never been defeated before, even by the Dutch, and so this event was seen as signalling the end of the *ulama* (religious leaders) era.¹⁶

In sum, the widespread feeling that Aceh was being economically exploited by Jakarta, combined with the end of the period of dominance of the religious leaders and the rapid changes in Acehnese society in the previous two decades, all contributed to an increase in anti-Jakarta feeling among the Acehnese. Against this backdrop the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) emerged and slowly gained the support of the Acehnese people.

The rise of the Free Aceh Movement and the Indonesian government response

On 4 December 1976 Teungku Hasan di Tiro, a prominent political activist from Pidie district, unilaterally declared Acehnese independence and established the Free Aceh Movement. The Indonesian government responded to this declaration

by immediately launching military operations in Aceh, concentrating on the areas surrounding Pidie. The Indonesian military operation managed to limit the activities of the Free Aceh Movement but it failed to capture Teungku Hasan di Tiro. In 1979 he left Aceh and established a government in exile in Sweden.¹⁷

During the 1980s the Indonesian military appeared to be winning its battle against the Free Aceh Movement. However, in early 1989 the Free Aceh Movement re-emerged, attacking military and police posts throughout the region. By mid-1990 it appeared that the Free Aceh Movement had gained substantial support within the population, especially in the areas of Pidie, North Aceh and East Aceh.

How did the government authorities respond to this development? The governor at that time was an Acehnese former academic, Ibrahim Hassan. He had come to this position with the political support of President Suharto. Following the re-emergence of the Free Aceh Movement Ibrahim Hassan asked President Suharto for an increased military presence in Aceh. The military then deployed about 6000 troops in Aceh, increasing to about 12 000 the total number of troops already stationed there.¹⁸ Soon after the troops arrived Aceh was made a 'Military Operations Area' (Daerah Operasi Militer, DOM). It was to keep this status until August 1998.¹⁹

During the Military Operations Area period Aceh became an occupied military territory similar to East Timor. The Indonesian military utilised a variety of tactics in the attempt to eradicate the Free Aceh Movement. The result was deterioration of the rule of law in Aceh. With the justification of restoring security and order, the military and police authorities were given powers to arrest, interrogate, torture and even kill those who were suspected members or supporters of the Free Aceh Movement. The military units deployed belonged to the Jakarta-based Strategic Command (Komando Strategi Angkatan Darat, KOSTRAD) and the Special Forces Regiment (Komando Pasukan Khusus, KOPASUS). These have the reputation of being the most ruthless of Indonesia's military units.²⁰

A prominent Acehnese human rights activist, Hasballah M Saad (who until recently was the Minister of Human Rights under the Abdurrahman Wahid government) recalled what he witnessed in Aceh in the 1980s:

Every day people would come across someone who had been shot, placed at the side of the road, uncovered. In fact in 1989 there was no more Free Aceh, although that was always the accusation. And what was so distressing was the sadistic murder, everywhere, of civilians. People were shot in the head, wedged against a papaya. That is, their cheek was against the papaya, then with a short-barrelled rifle the papaya was shot and the bullet pierced the victim's head. And this was done in public. There was an element of 'shock therapy' in this.²¹

After the downfall of President Suharto in May 1998, other Indonesians were finally able to hear stories of human rights violations committed by the Indonesian military and police authorities during the Military Operations Area period. The following stories describe the suffering of civilians in the Pidie area in 1990.²²

Story one

One night, a soldier along with five others came to the house of a sickly woman who was in her 60s and her daughter, who was seven months pregnant. They did not offer any greeting, but immediately began to ransack the house. After shouting and hitting the occupants with a torch, the pregnant woman was told to undress (she was going to be raped), but she threw down a lamp and shouted 'I have a husband!'. Then the soldier sought out her husband, who was on night patrol, dragged him to the house, and took his mother-in-law, who was unwell. They were tied together. In the car they were stripped naked. Then people, including children, were rounded up and brought to the watch point at 6am. The husband was dragged along by the car and then run over. Finally he was shot in the genitals. His mother-in-law, meanwhile, was shot from behind in the nape of the neck (many times) until her head came off and rolled away.

Story two

There is also the story of a 24-year-old widow with one child. She was taken from her home at around 6am one morning. Then she was tortured and stripped at the watch point. The local people were told to assemble in the yard of the Mosque. The woman tried to cover her body with her two hands, but her hands were kicked, and hit with guns. Everyone was forced, through beatings and kicking, to watch the torture. They relate that the woman's underpants were removed with a boot and her breasts were kicked until they were bruised. The woman screamed 'Just shoot me!'. Her request was soon fulfilled. Witnessed by the crowd, she was shot through the ear with a pistol.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2 almost 2000 people disappeared, more than 1000 were killed, and more than 3000 were tortured during the nine years of the Military Operations Area period, while thousands of Acehnese became widows and orphans. Also, between 1991 and 1995, about 5000 Acehnese became refugees in Malaysia, and many thousands of others were displaced within Aceh.²³

TABLE 1
**Human rights violations in Aceh during the Military
Operations Area period (1989–98)**

<i>Type of violation</i>	<i>Total</i>
Disappearances	1958
Killing	1321
Torture	3430
Sexual violence	209
Robbery	160
Total	7078

Source: Compiled by ELSAM (the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy) from various sources, 1999.

TABLE 2
**Civilian victims in Aceh during the Military
 Operations Area period (1989–98)**

<i>Victims</i>	<i>Total</i>
Widows/widowers	3 000
Orphans	16 375

Source: Compiled by ELSAM (the Institute for Policy Research and Advocacy) from various sources, 1999.

Far from improving security and order in Aceh, the Indonesian government's response to the rise of the Free Aceh Movement in the 1990s created a climate of fear and frustration in the province because of the uncontrolled and excessive power exercised by the military and police authorities. As a military and political tactic, making Aceh a Military Operations Area backfired on the Indonesian government. It led to an increasing number of Acehnese supporting the push for an independent state, as had been advocated by the Free Aceh Movement since 1976.

Pressure to release Aceh from its Military Operations Area status grew among members of the bureaucracy, intellectuals, religious leaders and non-governmental organisations during the 1990s. But their demand was not to be met while President Suharto was still in power. Aceh was rich in natural resources and strategically located, and while the New Order government was in power military approaches to conflict would continue to be favoured over political ones.

Aceh under the Habibie transitional government (May 1998–October 1999)

The fall of Suharto and the rise of President Habibie in May 1998 was a historic event keenly monitored both in Indonesia and abroad.²⁴ The dynamics of local politics in Aceh were considerably affected by this political change in Jakarta. Stories about the human rights violations that were suffered by the people of Aceh during the Military Operations Area period were reported widely in the local and national media for the first time, as a new freedom of the press flourished in Indonesia. Day after day and night after night the Acehnese and the people of other Indonesian provinces were exposed to the terrible stories of what had occurred in Aceh in the previous nine years. The *Serambi Indonesia* and *Waspada* newspapers (based in Banda Aceh and Medan, respectively) were among the print media that gave significant coverage to these stories.²⁵ The increasing use of the internet by Indonesians in general and the Acehnese in particular also helped in the dissemination of information about the human rights situation in Aceh.²⁶

As discussed above, during the 1980s and 1990s Aceh had experienced rapid economic and political change. One result of this was the emergence of a variety of autonomous community-based organisations which included student organisations, NGOs and religious-based organisations such as *thaliban* (Muslim students) and *ulama dayah* (religious teachers). Many of the people active in establishing

these organisations were former student activists who had studied at universities in Java or abroad during the 1970s and 1980s. They were the driving force behind the reform movement (*gerakan reformasi*), which organised peaceful protests throughout Aceh in the months following the downfall of President Suharto in May 1998.²⁷ A similar flowering of civil society was happening in other parts of Indonesia. Broad and vigorous debates were established regarding the future of Indonesia in general, and the possible ways in which the challenges being faced by regional areas such as Aceh could be met.

Through the combination of press freedom and the emergence of civil society in Aceh the pressure to end Military Operations Area status increased enormously. Between April and early August 1998 a broad-based coalition of groups demanded that the Habibie government lift the Military Operations Area status in Aceh.²⁸ A number of delegations from Aceh went to Jakarta, bringing with them stories and evidence of the tragedy endured by the Acehnese during the Military Operations Area period. Organisations such as the Aceh Coalition of Human Rights NGOs (Koalisi NGO Hak Asasi Manusia Aceh) and the Aceh Human Rights Concern Forum (Forum Peduli HAM Aceh) were established with the aim of documenting human rights violations in Aceh.²⁹ At the same time, both the House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR) and the government-established National Human Rights Committee (Komite Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia—Komnas HAM) established fact-finding missions to investigate human rights violations in Aceh. Indonesian NGOs and journalists also flooded into Aceh.

As a result, the then Chief of the Armed Forces, General Wiranto, visited Aceh and on 7 August 1998 announced the lifting of Military Operations Area status from Aceh. He also made a public apology for the human rights violations committed by the military and police authorities in the previous nine years. This announcement was to be followed by the withdrawal of the military from Aceh. However, on 31 August 1998 something went wrong. On that day about 600 troops were withdrawn from the city of Lhokseumawe. As the military ceremony marking the withdrawal drew to a close, onlookers began to throw rocks at the departing troops. The situation escalated, and a few civilians were killed and many shops and offices in Lhokseumawe were burned down. The military blamed the supporters of the Free Aceh Movement for instigating this event, while the local people accused the military themselves of secretly fomenting unrest in order to justify their continued presence in Aceh.³⁰ Indeed, on 2 September 1998 General Wiranto ordered troops to remain in Aceh until the situation had improved.

How was it that, despite the official lifting of Military Operations Area status, the level of conflict and violence in Aceh escalated, and the military presence increased? It would seem that there were several contributing factors. First, the people of Aceh, especially the victims of human rights abuses and their relatives, were deeply disappointed and angry at the unwillingness of the Habibie government to prosecute those military or police personnel who were responsible for their suffering. According to a Jakarta-based Acehnese, what the Acehnese desired above all when Habibie came to power was for ‘justice to be upheld’ (*rasa keadilan harus dijunjung*).³¹ In other words, much could have been achieved in the search for a political settlement of this long conflict by offering

the victims of injustice material compensation, and acting to bring to account those responsible for their suffering. A report written by a group of NGO activists in Aceh summarises the feelings of anger and disappointment among the Acehnese towards the Habibie government and the Indonesian military in this way:

When Military Operations Area status was lifted on 7 August 1998, the people's hope was nearly restored. Unfortunately that step taken by the government was not followed by more concrete steps to take action against the perpetrators of human rights abuses. The hope of the people, who had suffered enough, was not taken up by the government, in fact the opposite occurred—the government allowed the military to concoct all sorts of rationales for their deeds that were at odds with the law. And the strange thing was that the government so openly sided with the military. The commitment of the government towards the people went no further than empty promises.³²

Feelings of anger among the Acehnese towards the Habibie government were expressed on several occasions by violent clashes with the military and police.³³ If the Acehnese complained about the behaviour of the military and police personnel, they would be accused of supporting the Free Aceh Movement and this often led to arrest and, in several cases, torture, disappearances and killing.

Second, after the downfall of Suharto there was an upsurge in the activities of the Free Aceh Movement, as supporters returned to Aceh from Malaysia and other parts of the world. Those who had been hiding in the mountains of Aceh also reappeared and began to live again in the villages and cities where they worked to popularise the independence campaigns and slogans. The supporters of the Free Aceh Movement used sermons at the local mosques, the Qur'an reading groups (*pengajian*) and also public meetings as avenues through which to spread the message of the Free Aceh Movement.³⁴ During the months of the Habibie government the armed wing of the Free Aceh Movement (Angkatan Bersenjata Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, AGAM) carried out an increasing number of attacks, mainly on Indonesian government property. On many occasions the Free Aceh Movement denied responsibility for destroying government buildings, accusing Indonesian military counter-insurgency officials of carrying out these acts in an effort to destroy its image in the eyes of the Acehnese people.³⁵ In a situation of conflict such as this, it can be difficult to know the truth. However, it is true that in areas that are Free Aceh Movement strongholds such as Pidie, North Aceh and East Aceh, there were a high number of clashes between the military and AGAM. This resulted in the death of many civilians, and the wanton destruction of public and private property.

Third, although Military Operations Area status was lifted in August 1998, between January and July 1999 the presence of the military and the police in Aceh actually increased.³⁶ During the period leading up to and following the Indonesian general election in June 1999, around 2000 troops from the special riot-prevention force (PPRM) were stationed in Aceh.³⁷ Anti-insurgency and other military operations continued to be carried out in the province. For instance, in January 1999 a massive military operation was launched to capture Ahmad Kandang, who was a suspected leader of the Free Aceh Movement. This resulted

in the death of civilians in several villages near Lhokseumawe.³⁸ Meanwhile, in early May 1999 more than 40 civilians were killed after troops clashed with demonstrators near Lhokseumawe, and in July 1999 a similar military operation to capture Teungku Bantaqiah, a religious leader from Beutong district, also caused the death of civilians.³⁹ This list could be greatly extended. More worryingly, in the 15 months of the Habibie government, conflict and violence spread to parts of Aceh that had previously been peaceful, such as West and South Aceh.⁴⁰ Jakarta-based Acehnese who have visited the province recently speak of seeing the roadsides littered with burnt out buses and cars. They also experienced at first hand the breakdown of law and order along the main road that connects Banda Aceh and Medan, the capital city of North Sumatra Province.⁴¹

As shown in Table 3 the Acehnese in 1999 continued to live in a situation of serious conflict with no guarantee of their basic needs for security and protection from human rights abuses. Table 4 documents the tens of thousands of Acehnese who have become refugees in their own land. Most of the refugees come from villages in North Aceh, East Aceh and Pidie, the areas where the conflict escalated during the 15 months of the Habibie government. The number of displaced people peaked in June–July 1999, at the time of the Indonesian general election.

Recent developments: part of Indonesia or an independent state?

News of the appointment of Abdurrahman Wahid as the new President of Indonesia at the end of October 1999 was not received warmly in Aceh. The Acehnese regarded Mr Wahid as untrustworthy, as he had failed to keep an earlier promise to raise the issue of a referendum for Aceh with the Habibie government.⁴² This meant that, in seeking a peaceful solution to the complex problem that he inherited from the Suharto and Habibie governments, the new president would encounter some difficulties.

Two important political developments had by now occurred in Aceh. First, overwhelming support for the creation of an independent state had grown among the people. Second, both the domestic and international community had begun to support Acehnese demands for those who had committed human rights violations in the past to be brought to trial.⁴³

TABLE 3
Human rights violations in Aceh Province during 1999

<i>Type of violation</i>	<i>Total</i>
Disappearances	19
Killing	254
Torture	372
Arrest without trial	332
Total	977

Source: LBH (Legal Aid Foundation) Office in Banda Aceh as quoted in *Waspada*, 27 December 1999.

TABLE 4
**Refugees and internally displaced persons in Aceh
 Province (June–July 1999)**

<i>Location</i>	<i>Number of camps</i>	<i>Total</i>
North Aceh	9	37 500
East Aceh	3	31 717
Pidie	6	48 400
Total	18	117 667

Source: Compiled by ELSAM from various sources, 1999.

On the first point, there is disagreement among Acehnese over how to achieve an independent state, with supporters of both violent struggle and non-violence.⁴⁴ The former method is championed by Teungku Hasan di Tiro and other supporters of the Free Aceh Movement and its armed wing, the latter by students, Muslim student (*thaliban*) groups, Islamic school students (*pesantren*) and the Islamic teachers (*ulama dayah*), who believe that the Acehnese independence should be achieved through a referendum or other democratic process.⁴⁵ The idea of re-establishing the Sultanate of Aceh, along the lines of that of Iskandar Muda in the 17th century is warmly supported by the Acehnese in villages or rural areas.⁴⁶

In the 15 months of the Habibie government both camps campaigned for their view. While it is hard to say which group is more influential, it is undeniable that the desire for the creation of an independent state in Aceh, one way or another, is very strong. It has been noted that, although the student-led movement for a peaceful referendum does not have the official support of the Free Aceh Movement, some of those involved believe that there could be room to negotiate on this idea with the Free Aceh Movement. It appears that most supporters of the Free Aceh Movement are the poor rural Acehnese who suffered most during the Military Operations Act period, but who might be amenable to a peaceful solution if given a real option.⁴⁷ When the then President Habibie visited Banda Aceh in March 1999, he witnessed overwhelming support for an internationally supervised referendum similar to that held in East Timor as tens of thousands of people demonstrated in front of the Baiturrahman mosque in Banda Aceh during his visit.⁴⁸ However, in contrast to his action on the crisis in East Timor, Habibie did not act on this demand. Support for an independent Aceh was by then so strong that it was clear to Jakarta that, if given the chance, this territory would indeed break away from Indonesia, setting a precedent for other troubled parts of the country.

In an attempt at an act of goodwill, Jakarta agreed to give more power to the local provincial government in Aceh to implement Islamic law in the territory.⁴⁹ In addition, two important new Bills (New Financial Equity and Local Government) were passed by parliament in May 1999. These bills offer Aceh (and other provinces of Indonesia) a greater share of locally raised revenue (which in the past had gone to Jakarta) and greater autonomy in running their own affairs.⁵⁰

However, these changes did not succeed in diverting the demand for independence. This was demonstrated on 8 November 1999 when about 700 000 Acehnese gathered in front of the Baiturrahman mosque to demand that a referendum be held in Aceh.⁵¹

Subsequently, inconsistent comments made by President Abdurrahman Wahid have led to confusion in Aceh. After he was appointed, Mr Wahid stated that he agreed in principle with the idea of allowing the Acehnese to hold a referendum to decide whether to remain a part of Indonesia or to become an independent state. But he would not designate a timeframe within which the referendum would be held.⁵² He later modified his initial statement, saying that if there were to be a referendum in Aceh there would not be the option of choosing independence; rather, the choice would be between continuing with its current status and full autonomy within the Republic of Indonesia.⁵³ Mr Wahid appeared to be buying time, with the aim of stepping up government negotiations with various parties in Aceh in a last ditch attempt to keep the province within Indonesia. It remains to be seen whether this strategy will be successful in establishing an outcome that is acceptable to both sides.

Further, Jakarta has been slow in its response to the issue of bringing to trial those involved in human rights violations. A few lower-ranking members of the military were tried and prosecuted in 1999 for human rights abuses in Aceh. They are regarded as having been scapegoated by their superiors. It is the military leaders that the people want brought to trial. The main obstacle in bringing this about is the Indonesian military elite. Many current military officers were stationed in Aceh at some point during the 1980s and therefore many of them would be brought to trial. The lack of action by the Habibie and Wahid governments on this issue has seriously hampered the progress of the reconciliation process in Aceh.

Against this backdrop, President Wahid has asked the Indonesian military to withdraw troops stationed in Aceh. He has also established new ministries responsible for human rights and law making bodies, and has asked these ministers (Hasballah M Saad and Yusril Ihza Mahendra) to investigate and address the issue of human rights violations in Aceh.⁵⁴ There appears to be a willingness on the part of the Wahid government to deal seriously with this issue. Indeed Mr Wahid has openly stated that the establishment of the rule of law is one of his government's main priorities: 'To establish democracy we have to establish the rule of law because there is no democracy without the rule of law ... the law is supreme, the supremacy of the law is guaranteed by the state'.⁵⁵

Now there are other positive signs emerging in Jakarta. Pressure continues to be exerted for the establishment of a special court to try those who have been responsible for human rights violations in Aceh and other parts of Indonesia, including the former province of East Timor.⁵⁶ In November 1999 the parliament established a special inquiry and invited several former top generals—including former Chiefs of the Armed Forces, Generals Benny Murdani, Try Sutrisno and Faisal Tanjung—to testify about their roles in Aceh during the Military Operations Area period.⁵⁷ At the same time government and non-government agencies have conducted inquiries into human rights violations in Aceh, and have indicated which top generals should be questioned over their role.⁵⁸ The govern-

ment continues to negotiate with the religious leaders, student groups, non-government organisations and the Free Aceh Movement, although as this article goes to print, no progress has been made towards a settlement.⁵⁹ Many believe that three essential steps must be taken if reconciliation is to occur: there must be a full withdrawal of the Indonesian military from Aceh; a neutral party must be brought into the negotiations between the government and the Acehnese; and immediate government action must be taken on the issue of human rights trials.

In an effort to end the escalation of conflict, in early May 2000 the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement signed an agreement known as the humanitarian pause (*jeda kemanusiaan*) aiming to stop military operations in Aceh and to allow the distribution of humanitarian assistance by various NGOs.⁶⁰ Sadly, this agreement has not reduced tensions in Aceh. It was estimated that more than 100 people from both sides were killed between August and October 2000.⁶¹ In response, both the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement agreed to extend the humanitarian pause until December 2000.⁶² So far Jakarta has not yet come up with a comprehensive policy to end the conflicts in the province once and for all.⁶³ When President Wahid visited Aceh on 19 December 2000 he failed to use this opportunity to bring about a political settlement that could benefit both sides.⁶⁴

Conclusion

This article has examined the ongoing conflict in Aceh in the post-Suharto period. It shows that the region has experienced wars and conflicts since the Dutch colonial period until today. It also suggests that the roots of conflict in Aceh can be found early on during the independence period. As shown in this article, anti-Jakarta feeling among the Acehnese increased rapidly during the Suharto period (1966–98) and this contributed to the popularity of the Free Aceh Movement. The human rights violations committed by the Indonesian military during the Suharto period also made it possible for political leaders in Jakarta to win over the minds and hearts of the Acehnese. The article also contends that both parties—the Indonesian military and the armed wing of the Free Aceh Movement—were responsible for the human rights abuses in Aceh during the Habibie transitional government period. Moreover, as a result of the Indonesian government's neglect of the human rights issues experienced by the Acehnese, there is overwhelming support among the population for a referendum to decide whether Aceh should remain part of Indonesia or be an independent state, similar to East Timor.

Will the government of President Abdurrahman Wahid be able to find a just and mutually acceptable way to resolve the conflict in Aceh? This remains to be seen. What is clear, however, is that the conflict in Aceh is complex and has not been solved through violence. Through genuine dialogue and peaceful negotiations it may be possible to reduce the tensions between Aceh and Jakarta and take steps towards reconciliation. The full extent of suffering in Aceh is yet to be known. It is hoped that the investigations currently being carried out by human rights organisations in Indonesia and abroad will bring more of this human tragedy to light, so that in knowing the experience of the people, restitution can

be made, and the ordinary people of Aceh may begin to feel that their story has been heard.

Notes

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- ¹ M C Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia since c 1300*, London: Macmillan, 1993, p 6.
- ² A Reid, *The Contest for North Sumatra, Atjeh, the Netherlands and Britain 1858–1898*, Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1969, p 3.
- ³ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, p 4.
- ⁴ Abdullah Ali, 'Aceh Dahulu, Sekarang dan Masa Depan' (Aceh in the past, present and future), in Tulus Widjanarko & Asep S Sambodja (eds), *Aceh Merdeka dalam Perdebatan* (Free Aceh in Debate), Jakarta: Cita Putra Bangsa, 1999, pp 4–5.
- ⁵ Eric Morris, 'Aceh: social revolution and the Islamic vision, in A R Kahin (ed), *Regional Dynamics of the Indonesian Revolution, Unity from Diversity*, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp 86–87.
- ⁶ Tim Kell, *The Roots of Acehnese Rebellion, 1989–1992*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Cornell University, 1995, p 9.
- ⁷ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, p 220.
- ⁸ H M Nur El Ibrahimy, 'Federasi Merupakan Solusi Paling Tepat untuk Aceh' (Federation is the best solution for Aceh), *Tempo*, 26 December 1999.
- ⁹ Ricklefs, *A History of Modern Indonesia*, p 220.
- ¹⁰ Geoffrey Robinson, 'Rawan is as Rawan does: the origins of disorder in New Order Aceh', *Indonesia*, 66, 1998, p 135.
- ¹¹ Abdullah Ali, 'Aceh Dahulu', p 10.
- ¹² Sayed Mudhahar Ahmad, 'Masalah Aceh: Dilema antara Sikap, Martabat dan Rasa Keadilan' (The problem of Aceh: the dilemma between attitudes, honour and the sense of justice), in Widjanarko & Sambodja, *Aceh Merdeka Dalam Perdebatan*, p 85.
- ¹³ Robinson, 'Rawan is as Rawan does', p 137.
- ¹⁴ Al Chaidar, 'Protes Orang-orang Aceh' (the protest of the Acehnese), in Widjanarko & Sambodja, *Aceh Merdeka Dalam Perdebatan*, p 85.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, p 220.
- ¹⁶ Aris Arif Mundayat, 'Ulema dan Uleebalang di Aceh! Kontestasi idologi Islam?' (The ulama and the ulleebalang in Aceh! Contest for Islamic ideology?), in *Kisah dari Kampung Halaman, Masyarakat Suku, Agama Resmi dan Pembangunan*, Seri Dian IV (Stories from the Countryside: Ethnic Groups, Formal Religion and Development), Yogyakarta: Interfidei, 1996, pp 213–214.
- ¹⁷ From the 1950s until 1976, Teungku Hassan di Tiro had lived abroad and had argued that according to international law Aceh had the right to be an independent state and therefore the Indonesian government had no legal foundation for remaining in Aceh. In 1976 he returned to Aceh to lead the independence movement. Since 1979 he has resided in Sweden and has continued to be the leader of the Free Aceh Movement.
- ¹⁸ Isma Sawitri, Amran Zamzami & B Wiwoho, *Simak dan Selamatkan Aceh* (Take Notice and Save Aceh), Jakarta: Tim Peduli Aceh, 1999, p 43.
- ¹⁹ Robinson, 'Rawan is as Rawan does', p 131.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*, p 140.
- ²¹ Quoted from 'Kekejaman Luar Biasa Melawan Peradaban Manusia, Wawancara Wimar Witoelar dengan Hasballah M Saad' (Extraordinary cruelty towards humanity, an interview between Wimar Witoelar and Hasballah M Saad) in Widjanarko & Sambodja, *Aceh Merdeka dalam Perdebatan*, p 113. Under the Abdurrahman Wahid government (October 1999–August 2000), Hasballah M Saad has become the Minister of Human Rights, the first position of this kind in Indonesia. One of the most important tasks that Mr Hasballah has is to investigate human rights violations in Aceh during the Military Operations Area period.
- ²² These stories can be found in Otto Syamsuddin Ishak, 'Bila Histeria Keacehan Bangkit' (When the hysteria over Aceh arose) in Widjanarko & Sambodja, *Aceh Merdeka dalam Perdebatan*, pp 33–34.
- ²³ Sawitri *et al*, *Simak dan Selamatkan Aceh*, p 43.
- ²⁴ See Arief Budiman, B Hatley & D Kingsbury (eds), *Reformasi, Crisis and Change in Indonesia*,

- Clayton: Monash Asia Institute, 1999; and G Forrester & R J May (eds), *The Fall of Soeharto*, Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing, 1998.
- ²⁵ These newspapers can also be found through their websites. For *Serambi Indonesia*, see <<http://www.indonesia.com/serambi/>> and for *Waspada*, see <<http://www.waspada.com>>.
- ²⁶ Other websites containing news and information on Aceh are <<http://www.aceh.org>> and <http://members.xoom.com/aceh_merdeka/RELATEDLINKS.html>. For English language websites, see <<http://www.kompas.com>> and <<http://www.thejakartapost.com>> and on the role of the internet, see D T Hill & Krishna Sen, 'The internet in Indonesia's new democracy', in Peter Ferdinand (ed), *The Internet, Democracy and Democratization*, London: Frank Cass, 2000, pp 119–136.
- ²⁷ Interview with Ihdhal Kasim, Jakarta, 28 September 1999. See also Robinson, 'Rawan is as Rawan does', p 145.
- ²⁸ Sawitri, et al, *Simak dan Selamatkan Aceh*, p 44.
- ²⁹ V Johanson, 'Human rights and the general election 1999 in Aceh' in *Perspectives from the Periphery*, a report of the ACFOA Non-Government Election Monitoring Delegation, June 1999, p 45.
- ³⁰ Sawitri, et al, *Simak dan Selamatkan Aceh*, p 25.
- ³¹ Interview with Nashrun Marzuki, Jakarta, 30 September 1999.
- ³² Tim Studi Aceh, *Resolusi Permasalahan Aceh* (Resolving the problem of Aceh), a report published in 1999.
- ³³ Asia Watch, *Indonesia: Why Aceh is Exploding*, Human Rights Watch Press Backgrounder, 27 August 1999.
- ³⁴ Interview with A H Semendawai, Jakarta, 29 September 1999. See also Sawitri et al, *Simak dan Selamatkan Aceh*, pp 20–21.
- ³⁵ Asia Watch, *Indonesia: Why Aceh is Exploding*, p 3.
- ³⁶ The Indonesian military even proposed creating a new Regional Military Command (Komando Daerah Militer, KODAM) in Banda Aceh in order to ensure their presence in Aceh in the long term. However, the then President Habibie did not approve the idea. In terms of military structure, Aceh Province is divided into two Military Resort Commands (Komando Resort Militer, KOREM), KOREM 011/Lilawangsa and KOREM 012/Teuku Umar. Both are under the authority of the Regional Military Command No 1 based in Medan, the capital city of North Sumatra Province. 'Kodam Iskandar Muda Bata!' (Iskandar Muda kodam cancelled), *Waspada*, 2 November 1999.
- ³⁷ Johanson, 'Human rights and the general election 1999 in Aceh', p 46.
- ³⁸ Asia Watch, *Indonesia: The May 3, 1999 Killings in Aceh*, Human Rights Watch Press Backgrounder, 1999.
- ³⁹ *Ibid*; and 'Beutong incident victims given proper burial', *Jakarta Post*, 29 July 1999.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with Ihdhal Kasim, Jakarta, 29 September 1999.
- ⁴¹ Interview with Nashrun Marzuki, 30 September 1999.
- ⁴² Gus Dur Sulit Diterima Banda Aceh' (Gus Dur not well received in Banda Aceh), *Waspada*, 23 October 1999.
- ⁴³ Asia Watch, *International Effort Needed on Aceh*, press release, 1999.
- ⁴⁴ Tim Studi Aceh, *Resolusi Permasalahan Aceh*, p 14.
- ⁴⁵ The idea of the referendum started at a meeting of the All Acehese Student and Youth Congress held on 1–4 February 1999. After this a public education campaign about the merits of holding a referendum in Aceh was carried out throughout Aceh. On 5–7 April 1999 the Congress of Thaliban endorsed the idea of a referendum, and later on 13–14 September 1999, the *ulama dayah* from all over Aceh also gave their support for a referendum for Aceh. It was during this meeting that the prominent Muslim leaders and presidential contenders Amien Rais and Abdurrahman Wahid witnessed the popular support for a referendum. *Ibid*, p 15.
- ⁴⁶ Interview with Otto Syamsuddin Ishak, Melbourne, 29 October 1999.
- ⁴⁷ Johanson, 'Human rights and the general election 1999 in Aceh', p 46.
- ⁴⁸ 'Diplomasi Habibie Menjawab Referendum' (Habibie's diplomacy in responding to the referendum), *Gamma*, 4 April 1999; 'Maaf Habibie dan Gebuk Aparat' (Apology from Habibie and attack from the troops), *Detak*, 30 March 1999; and 'Message from Aceh', *Jakarta Post*, 29 March 1999.
- ⁴⁹ 'Hukum Islam Berlaku, Gejolak Aceh Berhenti' (Islamic law goes ahead, the trouble in Aceh stops), *Merdeka*, 28 July 1999.
- ⁵⁰ However, in delivering his first budget on 20 January 2000, Mr Wahid has failed to give greater financial autonomy to the provinces. The government had said earlier that it would eventually allow provincial authorities to keep up to 75% of their earnings. *The Australian*, 21 January 2000.
- ⁵¹ 'Ratusan Ribu Massa Hadiri SU MPR di Banda Aceh' (Hundreds of thousands attend rally in Banda Aceh), *Waspada*, 8 November 1999; and D Greenlees, 'Aceh's protest stirs Jakarta', *The Australian*, 10 November 1999.
- ⁵² 'Gus Dur Setuju Referendum Aceh Tapi Yakin Aceh takkan Pisahkan Diri' (Gus Dur agrees to referendum in Aceh, confident Aceh will not secede), *Republika*, 9 November 1999; and M Cohen,

- ⁵³ 'Alarms in Aceh', *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 18 November 1999.
- ⁵⁴ D Greenlees, 'Aceh referendum next year: Wahid', *The Australian*, 17 November 1999.
- ⁵⁴ 'Keputusan Sidang Kabinet: Tarik Pasukan TNI dari Aceh' (Cabinet decision: withdraw troops from Aceh), *Waspada*, 6 November 1999.
- ⁵⁵ As quoted by D Greenlees, 'Jakarta generals blame troops', *The Australian*, 1 December 1999.
- ⁵⁶ 'Yusril: Dibentuk Peradilan Koneksasi di Aceh' (Yusril: human rights court to be set up in Aceh), *Republika*, 15 November 1999.
- ⁵⁷ 'Rapat Pansus Aceh Dengan Para Mantan Jenderal Bagai Peradilan' (Meeting of special Aceh inquiry committee with former generals like a trial), *Waspada*, 30 November 1999; and 'Siapa Saja Perwira Tinggi yang pernah bertanggungjawab di Aceh?' (Which former generals were responsible in Aceh?), *Warta Berita Radio Netherland*, 10 November 1999.
- ⁵⁸ D Greenlees, 'Army chiefs linked to Aceh', *The Australian*, 10 December 1999.
- ⁵⁹ Communication with ELSAM, 14 January 2000.
- ⁶⁰ This agreement was signed by Hassan Wirayuda (an Indonesian ambassador in Switzerland), and Zaini Abdullah, a representative of the Free Aceh Movement. It is believed that the Swiss-based organisation, the Henry Dunant Foundation was organising this meeting, which was held in Geneva. 'Government and GAM sign note of humanitarian understanding', at <http://www.kompas.com/kompas-cetak/0005/13/English/gove.htm>.
- ⁶¹ Among those who were killed are Jafar Sidiq Hamzah, US-based Acehnese human rights activist and Dr Sarwan Idris, a rector of the Ar-raniry State Islamic Institute (IAIN) in Banda Aceh. See International Crisis Group, 'Aceh: escalating tension', Indonesia Briefing, 7 December 2000; Amnesty International, 'Indonesia: the Consultative Group on Indonesia' (CGI), a briefing for government and members and donor agencies', ASA 21/051/2000; and 'Aceh Butuh Gencatan Senjata' (Aceh needs ceasefire) at <http://www.koridor.com/artikel.php/103700>.
- ⁶² 'RI-GAM Sepakat Perpanjang Jeda Kemanusiaan' (RI-GAM agree to extend the humanitarian pause) at <http://www.tempo.co.id/news/2000/9/2/1,1,1,9,id.html>.
- ⁶³ For instance, see an interview with a newly elected Aceh Governor, Abdullah Puteh, 'Menyelesaikan Konflik Aceh, Harus Didahului dengan Penyejukan' (The cooling-down condition must be created first in order to end conflicts in Aceh) at <http://www.tempo.co.id/harian/profil/prof-abdullah.html>.
- ⁶⁴ 'Beyond Gus Dur visit', *Jakarta Post*, 20 December 2000; and 'Arti Sebuah Kunjunga' (Meaning of the visit), *Media Indonesia*, 20 December 2000.