

Learning from 12 Years of Peace in Aceh: Seeking Prosperity and Progress in Aceh

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Abstract- *This paper aims to discuss the progress of peace in Aceh after the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Aceh Freedom Movement, or Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM), and the Republic of Indonesia in Helsinki in 2005. Prior to this, Aceh was a tense region and home to the longest armed conflict in Southeast Asia – underway since 1982. The people of Aceh were fighting to realize the concept of self-independence. However, the movement came to a stop when the devastating tsunami hit Aceh in 2004. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the political, social, economic and cultural achievements since Aceh entered into a new chapter of peace. Using primary and secondary data in the context of descriptive analysis, this paper offers a comprehensive perspective on current conditions in Aceh. This study found that social and economic progress in Aceh has not been as successful as its political achievements. Furthermore, in terms of culture, progress has been ambiguous. This paper aims to provide a better understanding of how to maintain peace in Aceh by addressing social, political, economic and cultural issues with the goal of attaining prosperity and well-being for the people of Aceh.*

Keywords- 12nd Acehness Peace Agreement; Learning Process; Progress of Peace.

I. Introduction

The year 2005 will be remembered as the year that peace came to Aceh. It was the year in which both

parties, the Aceh Freedom Movement (GAM) and the Republic of Indonesia agreed to end the 32 year old armed conflict in the region. The conflict destroyed social and economic stability in Aceh, with reports of around 10.000 - 33.000 people dying during the hostilities (Aspinall & Dialogue, 2008; Ross, 2005). The conflict was one of the longest-running armed conflicts in Southeast Asia (Gleditsch, Wallensteen, Eriksson, Sollenberg, & Strand, 2002; Ross, 2005). One positive element of the devastating tsunami of 2004 was that it contributed to the end of the conflict. The tsunami itself caused roughly 230.000-280.000 deaths (Athukorala & Resosudarmo, 2005; Gaillard, Clavé, & Kelman, 2008), but was also a turning point for people to reflect on the promise of peace for Aceh.

Aceh was long known as a region of resistance and was consistently struggling against colonial nations such as the Portuguese, Dutch and Japanese (Reid, 2005). Even when all of present day Indonesia had been captured by the Dutch by the 19th century (Penders, 2002; Reid, 2005), Aceh was still fighting against the colonial power of the time. In fact, the state of Aceh fought until 1912 when the last sultan of Aceh was captured and brought to Java (Basry & Alfian, 1997; Takeshi, 2013). This was not the end of war in the region however, as a guerrilla war arose there. It was inspired by religious leaders (Ulama) and tribal leaders (Umar) and considered a holy war.

This holy war inspired a tremendous reaction from the masses who saw it as a chance to fight for their

identity (Merry & Milligan, 2009). The Dutch went on to claim that the Aceh war was one of the longest and costliest wars in their history (Barter, 2008; Basry & Alfian, 1997). The perseverance of the Acehnese was no surprise as they were engaged in fighting to assert their identity as a free state.

Moreover, Acehnese history is related to the spread of Islam in Southeast Asia. It is difficult to talk about Islam in Southeast Asia without mentioning Aceh. In fact, Aceh is often said to be the centre of Islam in Southeast Asia (Ambary, 1998). The prominent role played by Acehnese people in spreading Islam in Southeast Asia has been reaffirmed by archaeological evidence, in the form of Acehnese tombstones which have been found in the region, including in Malaysia, Thailand and Brunei (Perret, 2007; Yatim, 1988). Furthermore, the finding of ceramics in Lambri confirms that Aceh was a route of international trade (McKinnon, 1988) which enabled economic development in Aceh to flourish. Imported goods and products from China, Middle East, India and Southeast Asia were brought to Aceh and the area was also an important production center for rice, pepper, spices, and timber (Takeshi, 2013).

This paper provides a rich discussion of Aceh in the wake of the peace process. The paper is divided in four areas of discussion. The first focuses on the issue of political progress in Aceh in the era of peace. This includes political parties which have participated in elections, since the first election was held in 2006 until 2017. It looks at the political narrative and dynamics between the local and national parties in the Aceh parliament.

The second area of discussion focuses on social issues including unemployment and poverty in Aceh. It also looks at the welfare of the people in Aceh in the post-conflict era. Social issues have become an area of debate due to high levels of unemployment and poverty in Aceh. Addressing this issue will provide a deeper understanding of the direction of the peace process in Aceh.

The third area of discussion focuses on economic issues in Aceh in the post-conflict era. It looks at how Aceh has used its state budget after being designated as a special autonomous area. Unlike its provincial neighbours, Aceh receives a special transfer budget from the central government. The paper discusses how the budget has been allocated to accelerate economic progress in Aceh.

The final area of discussion focuses on contemporary cultural issues in Aceh. The right of special autonomy has been given to Aceh province, enabling it to apply and practice Islamic (Sharia) law in society. This was granted by the Law on Aceh Number 11 of 2006. In practice, the application of sharia law has been ambiguous. In fact, there are still improvements required to fully implement sharia law in Aceh (Salim, 2008). There is a historical context here, as Aceh was once an Islamic state with qanun (Islamic law). Qanun, which was influenced by the Turkish Ottomans, offers a unique perspective to the debate surrounding qanun as a system of laws within the national legal system (Hadi, 2004).

Aceh at Peace

In August 2005, two delegations held an important meeting to discuss the future of Aceh. The meeting was mediated by former Finnish president Mr Martti Ahtisaari (Kingsbury, 2006). The Indonesian delegation was headed by the former Minister of Law and Human Rights Mr Hamid Awaluddin, while Aceh was represented by the Foreign Minister of the Aceh Freedom Movement and Prime Minister of Aceh Freedom Movement, Mr Malik Mahmud and Zaini Abdullah. Together they signed a historical agreement to end one of the longest-running armed conflicts in Southeast Asia. It also represented an important step in the rebuilding of Aceh after the terrible tsunami of 2004. The MoU they signed began with a statement from Mr Awaluddin declaring that “pat ujeun yang hana pira, pat prang yang han reuda” (Bhakti, 2008). It means there is no rain that would not stop, no war that would not cease.

II. POLITICAL ACHIEVEMENTS 12 YEARS AFTER THE PEACE AGREEMENT

This paper will discuss the political narrative after the end of the armed conflict. This was a period which saw a change from armed struggle to a political movement. It involved a great challenge in changing the perspective of the former rebels and persuading them to enter the political arena. There was, for example, a lot of distrust on the part of the former rebels about participating in the first election.

The first election in 2006 saw pro-independence candidates competing in it. In fact, the former

spokesperson for the Aceh Freedom Movement, Mr Irwandi Yusuf, won the election. The table below details the results of this election and subsequent elections, in the legislative branch:

Table 1.1: Results of Executive Elections in Aceh from 2006 to 2017.

| Level of Election | Winner | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| | 2006 | 2012 | 2017 |
| | | | Irwandi Yusuf & Nova Iriansyah (Aceh National Party and Democratic Party + National Parties) (sharing power with national parties) |
| Provincial Level (Governor of Aceh) | Irwandi Yusuf & Muhammad Nazar (Pro-Independence-Ex rebel, Spokesperson for GAM) | Zaini Abdullah & Muzakkir Manaf (Aceh Party and National Parties-Ex Foreign Minister and General of the Rebel Army) | |

Sources: 2017 General Election Commission

This table shows how former rebels have dominated the executive position in government after the peace agreement. However, as demonstrated in the table below, local political parties' dominance in the Aceh parliament is weakening. It seems that the trust the Acehnese people have in local parties is declining as they feel that they may not be able to deliver their hopes and aspirations for change and a better Aceh.

Table 1.2: Results of Legislative Elections in Aceh in 2009 and 2014.

| Political Parties | Seats in Parliament | |
|---------------------------|---------------------|----------|
| | 2009 | 2014 |
| Local Parties | | |
| Aceh Party (PA) | 33 seats | 29 seats |
| Aceh National Party (PNA) | Not established yet | 3 |
| National Parties | | |
| Democratic Party (PD) | 10 | 8 |
| Golkar | 8 | 9 |
| PAN | 5 | 7 |
| PPP | 4 | 6 |
| PKS | 4 | 4 |
| PDIP | 0 | 0 |
| Total seats | 69 | 81 |

Source: 2017 General Election Commission

*Some parties are not displayed in the table 1.2

Table 1.2 shows that the majority of parliament members come from local parties. Ex-rebels formed the Aceh Party, abbreviated to PA, in 2009. This was a progressive step to transform the armed movement into a political movement. In its first

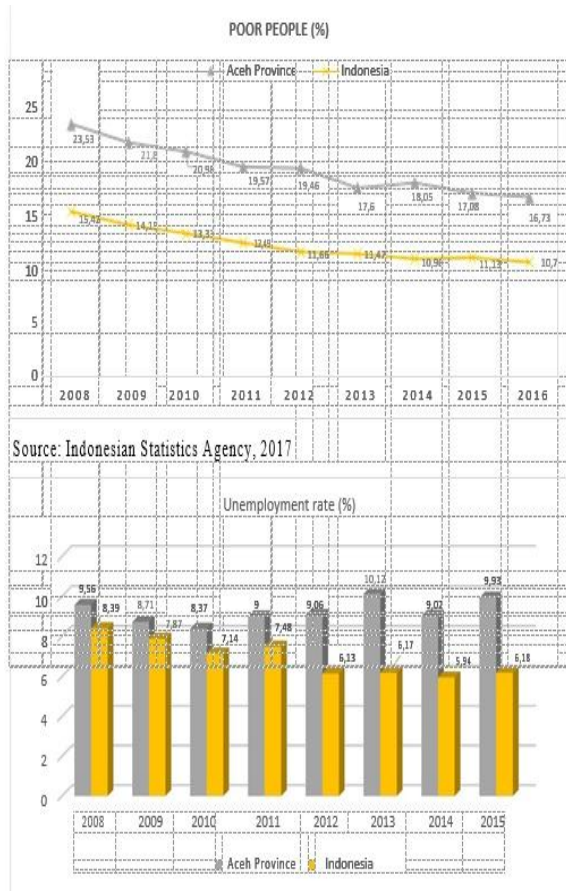
attempt, the PA did fantastically well. However, after another local party joined the political arena – the Aceh National Party, or PNA, which was also founded by ex-rebels, the PA lost some seats in the 2014 election.

The strength of the national parties, as illustrated in table 1.2, is based mainly in the cities and the central part of Aceh. These national parties, such as the Democratic Party (PD) of former Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), have become increasingly popular. Mr Yudhoyono supported the peace agreement in 2005 during his presidency. Another political party, Golkar, enjoys a good image due to its leadership figure Mr Yusuf Kalla (former and current vice president) who gave strong support to the peace agreement. In contrast, however, other national parties, like the PDIP (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle), have not performed well in elections. In fact, the PDIP has no seats in the local Aceh parliament.

In addition to gaining political freedom after the peace agreement, Aceh has also welcomed freedom of speech and freedom of the press. There are also many local activists working for non-profit organisations, or NGOs, to achieve their aspirations for freedom and prosperity. These kinds of freedom were absent during the era of insurgency.

III. SOCIAL ACHIEVEMENTS 12 YEARS AFTER THE PEACE AGREEMENT

It is necessary to discuss social achievements by examining unemployment and poverty level statistics in Aceh compared to those at the national level. The data shows that unemployment and poverty in Aceh are higher than at the national level. In terms of social progress, therefore, there has been little improvement. More effort is still required to improve social conditions by providing financial and non-financial assistance to Acehnese people, especially those living in rural areas. Graph 1.1 shows a comparison between the unemployment level in Aceh and the national unemployment level, while graph 1.2 depicts a comparison between the poverty level in Aceh and the national poverty level.



Source: Indonesian Statistics Agency, 2017

These graphs shed light on social conditions in Aceh 12 years after the peace agreement.

IV. ECONOMIC ACHIEVEMENTS 12 YEARS AFTER THE PEACE AGREEMENT

There is no doubt that Aceh has struggled in terms of economic development due to the past conflict in the area as well as the tsunami disaster. Basic infrastructure was severely damaged during the tsunami. Moreover, the armed conflict had a significant negative impact on domestic and foreign investment. The government declared a national emergency and established the Agency for the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of Aceh, or BRR (Badan Rekonstruksi dan Rehabilitasi) (Nazara & Resosudarmo, 2007). This was the coordinating agency tasked with managing foreign funds from international donors as well as national funds intended to help Aceh recover after the tsunami. It took four years for BRR to finish its project in Aceh. At the end of its operations in 2009, BRR left Aceh

having built 112,346 housing units, 1,045 schools, 18 sea ports, 11 airports and 787 hospitals (Kompas, 2008).

Moreover, to speed up the process of integration in Aceh the government also established BRA (Badan Reintegrasi Aceh), or Aceh Reintegration Agency, to deal with the process of peace and reintegration in Aceh over the long term (Prasodjo, 2005). In addition, the central government allocated to the region a special budget, Dana Otonomi Khusus (Special Autonomy Fund) (McGibbon, 2004). In the era of autonomy in Indonesia, only two provinces have been given such a special fund – the provinces of Aceh and Papua.

This table below shows the special fund given to Aceh from 2011 to 2016 along with the Acehnese government budget.

Table 1.3 Special funds and Acehnese government budget

| Year | Transfer of special fund | Acehnese Governmental Budget |
|------|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| 2011 | IDR 4.5 trillion | IDR 7.7 trillion |
| 2012 | IDR 5.4 trillion | IDR 8.9 trillion |
| 2013 | IDR 6.2 trillion | IDR 11.7 trillion |
| 2014 | IDR 8.1 trillion | IDR 12.4 trillion |
| 2015 | IDR 7.01 trillion | IDR 12.7 trillion |
| 2016 | IDR 7.6 trillion | IDR 12.8 trillion |

Source: Indonesian Statistic Agency, 2017

This table illustrates how the Aceh governmental budget has depended on the special fund allocated to the province. However, the special budget will end in 2023 with an expected 163 trillion sent to Aceh as part of the peace agreement (Hillman, 2011). Therefore, management of the budget should be implemented effectively and efficiently so as to ensure that the Acehnese people can benefit from developing their economic conditions.

However, the realisation of budget policy in Aceh is often unsatisfactory in terms of making progress in economic development. This is reaffirmed by statistical data indicating that Aceh endures a lower level of economic development compared to its neighbouring provinces such as North Sumatra, West Sumatra and South Sumatra.

Table 1.4 Comparison of budgeting in Aceh and its neighbouring provinces.

| Year | Aceh Budgeting | North Sumatra Budgeting | West Sumatra Budgeting | South Sumatra Budgeting |
|------------|-------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 2017 | IDR 14,5 trillion | IDR 12,5 trillion | IDR 6,2 trillion | IDR 7,9 trillion |
| Population | 5 million | 14 million | 5 million | 8 million |

Source: Indonesian Statistics Agency, 2017

Table 1.4 shows that Aceh receives the highest amount of money among the provinces in Sumatra. However, economic development remains slow. Therefore, it can be said that the peace process has yet to perfectly complement economic development in Aceh (Phelps, Bunnell, & Miller, 2011). The challenge thus is to maintain economic progress while ensuring long-term peace in Aceh.

The current economic conditions in Aceh contrast with its previous standing as an international trade hub in Southeast Asia. According to Lombard, Aceh was the epicentre of the trade in spices and goods, including ceramics, in Southeast Asia. Aceh achieved glory and prosperity in the 17th century under the Acehese sultanate of the time (Lombard & Arifin, 2006). This needs to be emulated today.

V. CULTURAL ACHIEVEMENTS 12 YEARS AFTER THE PEACE AGREEMENT

Cultural identity cannot be excluded from the discussion. It has a significant impact on society in terms of customs, rules and norms. Aceh, as an ally of the Ottoman Empire in Southeast Asia, absorbed many Turkish traditions, especially the qanun, the influence of which has been confirmed by historians (Takeshi, 2013).

Aceh is the only province in Indonesia in which sharia law is applied. The special dispensation granted to Aceh in this regard formed part of the peace agreement. Aceh has carried out sharia law, for example, by using the whip on criminals since 2014 under Qanun Jinayah (Uddin, 2011). This may not be done in any other Indonesian province. The public are aware that corruption levels remain high in Aceh. As part of this, Acehese feel disappointed that sharia law only applies to ordinary people while the elite is largely untouchable by sharia law. Cultural progress remains ambiguous in Aceh, as exemplified by the fact that the implementation of

sharia law is seen as selective and symbolic, rather than essential.

Graph 1.4: Number of Corruption cases in Aceh

| Year | Corruption cases |
|------|------------------|
| 2013 | 61 |
| 2014 | 87 |
| 2015 | 53 |
| 2016 | 41 |

Source: Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), 2007

The table above indicates that the number of corruption cases in Aceh remains fairly high and undermines the province's development process. As Khaldun mentions in his book, corruption ruins civilization (Alrefai & Brun, 1994).

The era of peace in Aceh still involves the obvious challenge of how to deal with corruption and other aspects of Acehese society in order to enhance economic development in Aceh.

VI. CONCLUSION

The paper has sought to discuss the progress which has been achieved in Aceh since the signing of the peace agreement in 2005. To ensure that peace is maintained, political solutions to the province's problems must be sought. Achievements in the political arena have been somewhat overshadowed by declining trust in local parties. This should serve as a warning for local parties to restructure themselves in order to be able to listen to the voice of their constituents. People in Aceh yearn for better social and economic conditions, an issue which has not been properly addressed yet. The majority of people have not enjoyed a fruitful outcome from the peace agreement, as reflected in the province's high level of unemployment and poverty. More and better social and economic programs are thus needed to solve the current social and economic problems in Aceh. Long-term peace and security will only be achieved if the people play a role in promoting the process of development in Aceh. Peace has laid the platform for transforming and improving social and economic conditions in Aceh. Now, social justice and economic equality has to be delivered to ordinary people. Culturally, the fact that Aceh is considered the heart of Islam in Southeast Asia should not be ignored. As such, the application

of sharia law in daily life, and its effect on economics and politics in the province, should be looked at and made more equitable.

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