



IDSS COMMENTARIES (07/2005)

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GAM, ISLAM AND THE FUTURE OF ACEH

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8 February 2005

WITHIN days of the tsunami disaster, several Indonesian organisations sent volunteers to Aceh to provide humanitarian relief. Amongst them were two Islamist groups, the Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia (MMI) and the Front Pembela Islam (FPI). They set up a command post at an air force base in Banda Aceh to help bury the dead and distribute aid. But the gestures of MMI, or the Mujahidin Council of Indonesia, and FPI, or the Islamic Defenders Front, were opposed by the separatist Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM, or the Free Aceh Movement).

GAM's exiled leaders in Sweden issued a statement to say that the presence of MMI and FPI would be unhelpful to the cause of a free Aceh as the two groups' objectives were to establish an Islamic state -- which therefore implied that this was not something GAM was fighting for. "FPI and MMI are not welcome in Aceh and have never been supported by the Acehnese people, nor has their presence been requested. Their intervention in Aceh is therefore counterproductive," GAM added. The same view was taken by a coalition of student bodies fighting for a referendum on Aceh. The Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh (SIRA, or Aceh Referendum Central Information) said in its own statement: "Laskar Mujahidin and FPI's presence would steer the conflict in Aceh into a religious one." Laskar Mujahidin is the militia arm of MMI.

The Indonesian military in Aceh however responded to the presence of MMI and FPI with conflicting signals. The army said sentiments against MMI and FPI were unfairly overblowing the threat from these groups. A military spokesman, Col. Djazairi Nachrowi, was reported as saying that volunteers from both MMI and FPI were doing good humanitarian work and should not be discriminated against just because of their militant tendencies. But the air force took a harder line, expelling 19 of MMI's 206 volunteers from the airbase. An MMI official, Fauzan Al Anshari, said the air force did not give any reasons for the expulsion, but it was believed to have been under foreign pressure. According to Al Anshari, the foreign media had asked whether MMI was linked to Al Qaeda and when MMI denied this, rumours surfaced that they could be linked to GAM instead. In reality, however, GAM and MMI are ideologically not on the same page.

GAM and Islam

There is a general misconception that GAM wants an independent Islamic state of Aceh. This misreading is understandable given that the struggle for a free Aceh first began as a quest for an Islamic state. Fiercely independent-minded, the Acehnese were, historically, the last to fall to the Dutch colonising power in the 19th century. They then joined a Darul Islam rebellion

across Indonesia to set up an Islamic state in the 1950s when the incipient Indonesian nation failed to give Aceh a provincial status as promised. The Aceh revolt ended when the government in Jakarta gave Aceh the status of a “special territory”. But by 1976, a new movement emerged calling itself the “Acheh/Sumatra National Liberation Front” (ASNLF), using the old spelling for Aceh. Also known as GAM, it fought for an independent Aceh following Acehnese disillusionment with what they regarded as “Javanese economic and political domination”. Led by Teuku Hassan di Tiro, or Hassan Tiro, GAM was driven more by Acehnese ethno-nationalism than any Islamic ideology. Indeed, GAM’s objective is a secular-nationalist state, not an Islamic nation. Although a descendent of an ulama who led the 19th century resistance against the Dutch, di Tiro is ideologically more a socialist than an Islamist. GAM was formed by di Tiro along with a group of other foreign-educated Acehnese with commercial interests in the West. Indeed, GAM in its website, describes di Tiro as the president of Doral International Ltd, New York, a company active in such fields as investment banking, aviation services, petroleum, natural gas and shipping. However GAM in its initial years did not enjoy wide ground support in Aceh and its leaders subsequently moved to Malaysia, Libya and finally Sweden where several of its leaders acquired citizenship. It is from Sweden that GAM leaders like Hassan Tiro directed and rebuilt the separatist drive in Aceh.

In 2002, the ideological divide amongst the insurgents led to the birth of a small splinter group called the Front Mujahidin Islam Aceh (FMIA). This group wanted to continue the Darul Islam rebellion and sought to establish an Islamic state in Aceh. FMIA was led by Fauzi Hasbi, who also formed another small group called the Republik Islam Aceh (RIA). Both FMIA and RIA emerged out of their dissatisfaction with the secular orientation of GAM. The existence of the two groups is however now in doubt following the death of Fauzi, their common leader.

After the fall of Suharto in 1998, Jakarta’s strategy to resolve the separatist problem was to give the Acehnese people as much as they wanted -- so long as they remained within the unitary state of Indonesia. Hence Jakarta implemented a “special autonomy” package in 2001 that would provide for the return of 85% of oil and gas revenue to Aceh. More significantly, the special autonomy would allow the implementation of *syariah* or Islamic law, even though GAM has not generally demanded for *syariah*. It was a strategy to win over the “hearts and minds” of the Acehnese people and hopefully marginalise GAM in the process. GAM however refused to accept the special autonomy deal and the truce that took effect in December 2002 collapsed in March 2003. Jakarta subsequently declared GAM a terrorist organisation.

MMI, FPI and Laskar Jihad

GAM’s statement also referred to MMI as an umbrella organisation for “jihadist” groups such as FPI and Laskar Jihad. MMI was founded in August 2000 by Abu Bakar Bashir, whom foreign governments allege to be the spiritual head of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). FPI is headed by Muhammad Habib Rizieq who is better known for his radical approach of confronting bars and nightclubs that refused to shut down during the fasting month of Ramadan. Laskar Jihad in turn was started by Jaafar Umar Thalib, an Indonesian of Yemeni descent who took part in the war against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Practising the purist Wahabbi doctrine, Laskar Jihad draws membership from the urban poor and was formed to protect Muslims in Maluku in the inter-communal conflict there with the Christians. Laskar Mujahidin, on the other hand, is another jihadist group that has operated

alongside Laskar Jihad in Maluku.

The hardline stance adopted by MMI, FPI and Laskar Jihad is however not really shared by the majority of Indonesia's Islamic community, although they empathise with the groups' motivation to protect Muslim interests. For example, the Justice and Prosperity Party, (PKS), the Islamic party which is even more active in Aceh doing relief and humanitarian work, is not comfortable with the militancy of FPI and Laskar Jihad.

Conclusion

Aceh is where Islam first landed in Indonesia and subsequently spread to the rest of South-east Asia. That is why Aceh is also known as *Serambi Mekah* (Window to Mecca). The attachment that Acehnese have for Islam is therefore deep-seated. Analysts see Aceh's relationship with Islam in terms of three phases – Aceh as an independent and prosperous Islamic sultanate having its own diplomatic ties with Europe (from 1524 to 1873); Aceh during the Dutch colonial period, during which the Acehnese sultanate put up the strongest resistance against Dutch attempts to colonise the East Indies; and Aceh's role in its war for Indonesian independence and the subsequent fight for Darul Islam (1945-1959). The three phases shaped Aceh's distinct Islamic identity.

The rise of GAM in 1976 marked a shift towards Acehnese secular-nationalism at the level of the Acehnese political elite who seek independence. But on the ground, the Acehnese inclination towards the Islamic identity remains strong. This is a fact which GAM itself has had to accommodate. It is also a reason why the Indonesian government found it sensible to compromise and offer a special autonomy package that allowed the implementation of syariah law in Aceh, provided the province remained part of Indonesia. The offer of *syariah* is a major concession for Jakarta in view of its staunch commitment to the secularist-nationalist ideology of Pancasila.

If both GAM and Jakarta regard the separatist conflict as having gone on for too long, the post-tsunami period is the best time to end it. It is just as well that both have begun peace talks in Helsinki to find a rapprochement. But the road to permanent peace may not be easy to travel. It will depend on one fundamental: Can the two sides agree on what the future Aceh will be? GAM, given its ethno-nationalist ideology may not be fighting for an Islamic state. But its ultimate goal has always been an independent state of Aceh. This is however something Jakarta will never accept. In the Helsinki talks, Jakarta has even rejected GAM's offer to suspend its quest for independence in return for a referendum in Aceh within a decade. Does GAM feel weakened enough by the tsunami disaster to accept a final solution that falls short of its dream of an independent Aceh – Islamic state or not?

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