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The Acehese Conflict: Transnational Linkages, Responses and Implications

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The armed rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia, led by GAM, the Independent Aceh Movement, has been a significant internal security threat to that country since it broke out in 1976. The Aceh rebellion has been significant for its duration, resistance to negotiated settlement and support from abroad.

Transnational Linkages

The foreign connections can be traced to Libya, Sweden, Malaysia and Thailand. Libya helped Hasan di Tiro in founding the movement and also trained the initial batch of up to 600 GAM guerillas. However, these links have not been maintained in the 1990s, following Gaddafi's transformation into an African elder statesman in recent years.

The GAM leadership, headed by Hasan di Tiro, has been based in Sweden for years. From Sweden, GAM has been able to publicise the plight of the Acehese and its independence agenda for Aceh. At the same time, it has been able to raise funds from sympathizers abroad, many of whom are members of the Acehese diaspora.

Thousands of Acehese refugees have also sought sanctuary in neighbouring Malaysia since 1976. The assassination of an Acehese rebel leader (allegedly due to an internal struggle) in Kuala Lumpur on 2 June 2000 embarrassed the Malaysian government as it highlighted the presence of Acehese separatists operating freely in Malaysia. To Indonesia, this seemed to indicate at least passive complicity in the troubles in Aceh, leading to quite strained relations over this issue. However, at no time has the Malaysian government supported GAM's violence or its activities, and its Aceh policy has been humanitarian in approach.

In recent years, there have also been various allegations and reports of arms smuggled in from Thailand and Malaysia. Acehese sympathisers in southern Thailand and Malaysia are believed to be funding the rebellion. There is evidence that Muslim rebels in southern Thailand have been aiding the GAM guerrillas by helping channel assault rifles to them from black-market sources in Cambodia. It also appears that a Malaysian crime syndicate may have been involved in the arms smuggling.

After the watershed events of 11 September 2001, various allegations have also been made regarding links with Al Qaeda – with captured documents in Afghanistan reportedly referring to Al Qaeda recruitment centres / training facilities in Aceh. Given the deeply religious culture of Aceh, it is not surprising if some individual Acehese have been caught up in pan-Islamic radical agendas. However, the GAM leadership itself (which is nationalist and left-wing in orientation) has always kept its distance from Al Qaeda.

When Al Qaeda leaders Al Zawahiri (Osama bin Laden's deputy) and Mohammad Atef (Director of Operations, who was later killed in a US air attack in Afghanistan) visited Aceh in June 2000, GAM leaders rebuffed their efforts to embrace GAM. After the 11 September 2001 attacks, GAM leaders in fact expressed sympathy to the United States; Abdullah Syafiah, the GAM military commander shot dead by Indonesian forces in early 2002, is said to have sent a message of condolence to the US Ambassador in Jakarta. When the Indonesian militant group, Laskar Jihad later attempted to rally support for a radical religious agenda in Aceh, GAM called on Acehnese to stay away, a call heeded by most Acehnese. GAM has thus reaffirmed its nationalist and territorial objectives, and its refusal to get involved in a wider religious war.

The situation in Aceh deteriorated early this year although a Cessation of Hostilities Framework Agreement was signed on 9 December 2002. Conflict resumed in May 2003 after GAM ignored a government deadline to lay down arms and give up its secessionist demands. On its part, army chief, General Riyamizad Ryacudu, declared that "no region can break away". He also added: "Issues of justice, religion, autonomy, social welfare, education – these are not the Indonesian military's problem". The Indonesian armed forces thus sees the Aceh problem as a purely military one, requiring a military solution.

This tough nationalist line has popular support throughout Indonesia, and also serves the political interests of President Megawati Soekarnoputri, who will be contesting the 2004 presidential elections. Moreover, military action against GAM at this time would incur little diplomatic cost, given the context of a global war against terrorism.

International and Regional Responses

The United States' response has been generally muted, given its overriding need to obtain the cooperation of states in the region, particularly Indonesia, in the war against international terrorism. Indeed, the US response has been very different from its open approval of action against the Moro insurgents by the Philippine government. There, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had established a quasi-alliance relationship with Al Qaeda well before 11 September 2001, with some factions believed to be continuing to harbour Al Qaeda-linked Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) operatives within its ranks. In Aceh GAM had distanced itself from Al Qaeda well before 11 September 2001. Consequently, on 18 June 2003, Secretary of State Colin Powell took an even handed position by declaring that both the Indonesian government and GAM were at fault for the present conflict.

The ASEAN states did not discuss the Aceh situation at their recent Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh, except to issue a statement reiterating support for the "sovereignty, territorial integrity and national unity of Indonesia." The ASEAN states also pledged "to deny the separatist movement access to means of violence through, among all, preventing arms smuggling into Aceh province." Thus, ASEAN saw the Aceh conflict as an internal matter for Indonesia to resolve.

Singapore issued a statement affirming that it "continues to reiterate its full respect and support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Indonesia ... we believe that the national unity of Indonesia is vital to the peace, stability and prosperity of the region." Singapore's opposition to the idea of Acehnese independence has been consistent. In 1999, at the height of concerns over the possibility of Acehnese independence following East Timor's independence, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew stated that "no country in

Southeast Asia will recognise it” and that “nobody wants and nobody sees any benefit in the breaking up of Indonesia.”

The Malaysian government position regarding Acehese independence was articulated by Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar in 1999, when he stated that Malaysia wanted “to see Indonesia return to normal, its economy revived and Indonesia’s integrity as a nation defended at all times.” On the recent fighting, Malaysia urged Indonesia to restore peace, saying that violence could undermine stability in Southeast Asia. The martial law and military operations in Aceh also sparked fears that GAM elements as well as civilian refugees would flee to neighboring countries, especially Malaysia, creating a refugee crisis. Malaysia has thus stepped up naval patrols along the maritime border with Sumatra.

Implications

ASEAN countries fear the break-up and fragmentation of the Indonesian state should Aceh become independent. One concern is that demands for secession would be made by other regions of Indonesia. Another is that in an extreme scenario, the armed forces would not be able to quell all these rebellions at the same time. The end result would be the break-up, Yugoslavia-style, of Indonesia, with the likely emergence of several small, unstable states.

The emergence of an independent Aceh would also resonate further afield, galvanising rebels in places such as southern Thailand and the southern Philippines to intensify efforts to realise their aspirations for separate, and Islamic states. The spectre of a brace of Muslim mini-states, some espousing fundamentalist Islamic values, is alarming to ASEAN member-states.

Finally, while the economic impact has so far been limited, there are concerns, articulated by the US Navy, that the diversion of military assets to duties ashore and along the Aceh coast to enforce a naval blockade, is likely to result in a rise in sea piracy elsewhere in the busy Straits of Malacca. Aceh also produces a third of Indonesia’s liquified natural gas exports. The political uncertainties have already affected long-term contracts and operations at the Mobil natural gas facilities in Aceh, potentially affecting foreign currency earnings at a time when Indonesia badly needs these resources to recover from its huge debt and economic crisis.

Conclusion

The Indonesian military, with some 50,000 troops in Aceh, is likely to be able to eventually crush the bulk of GAM’s armed resistance, given the huge asymmetry in forces. Aceh will also never achieve independence due to a lack of international support.

But the presence of fundamental political, economic and social grievances in the province, which have never been satisfactorily rectified or addressed, coupled with the existence of an Acehese diaspora which continues to raise funds and provide financial support for GAM, means that it will be difficult for Indonesia to completely eradicate GAM’s presence. Aceh will remain a serious political problem for Indonesia. For the rest of ASEAN, however, the regional impact of the conflict will be minimal so long as Indonesia can contain the GAM separatists.

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