

## Democratic transition and the transformation of combatants in Aceh and Timor-Leste

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### Introduction

The former combatants and guerrillas discussed in this paper were members of paramilitary groups that have been involved in conflicts and wars for almost 30 years in Aceh, Indonesia and about 24 years in Timor-Leste (East Timor). The Aceh Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF) was established in October 1976 under the leadership of Hasan di Tiro as a continuation of the Darul Islam rebellious movement (Schulze 2003, 242) and later changed its name to Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) [as the author later refers to the Free Aceh Movement, the term should be introduced here] with a military wing, Angkatan GAM (AGAM). Di Tiro claimed that about 5000 combatants were trained in Libya between 1986 and 1989. However, Indonesian intelligence believed this number to be only 583 (Schulze 2003, 244). As a security strategy, a GAM peace negotiator reported in Helsinki that the combatants numbered only 3000 with about 800 weapons. In fact, there were more than thirty thousand combatants in Aceh in 2005 (Yusuf 2013). They also kept hundreds of other weapons and explosives for possible use in case the peace negotiations failed, as happened in 2001 when the Henry Dunant Centre failed to mediate between GAM and the Republic of Indonesia.

Former combatants in Timor-Leste are referred to as ‘veterans’ and include members of the Clandestine Front who carried out support work for the paramilitary group FALINTIL (Forças Armadas da Libertação Nacional de Timor-Leste) [The Armed Forces for the National Liberation of East Timor] in the towns. Some Clandestine Front leaders were FALINTIL members, living covertly, and the Front reported directly to FALINTIL commanders. The student movement RENETIL is a good example of the Clandestine Front in action. Some veterans are now working as non-military activists in government and political parties. FALINTIL has been integrated into the military and police services of Timor-Leste. The current President of Timor-Leste, General Taur Matan Ruak, is a former commander of FALINTIL who became chief of staff of the F-FDTL (Falintil-Defence Forces of Timor-Leste). After some protests due to feelings of discrimination between Western Timorese and Easterners, about 600 military personnel deserted in 2006. This created a national security crisis until 2008, when Major Alfredo Reinado, former commander of the Naval unit of Timor-Leste and a former leader of rebel, was killed during an attack against President José Ramos Horta (Sahin 2010).

This paper will present a comparative discussion of the transformation of combatants and guerrillas in Aceh and Timor-Leste. It will analyse the process of post-conflict democratic transition, in particular, how former combatants are transformed from a paramilitary force to a political movement. In this context, the dynamic of democracy will be seen as a process of transition towards permanent peace. This paper is based on interviews with former combatants, members of parliament and human rights activists in Aceh and the Indonesian capital Jakarta undertaken from 2010 to 2013, and interviews held in Dili, capital of Timor-Leste, in July 2013. It will begin by outlining some experiences of democratic transition in other post-conflict and post-war regions in Asia and Africa. In the second part of the paper, a comparison will be made between democracy in Aceh and Timor-Leste that will examine how former combatants participated in democratisation and peace-building in each of these regions during the 2012 elections.

The discussion will advance two arguments, firstly, that democratic transition in general has been regarded by many election observers as a relatively peaceful process. Although a number of attacks and killings occurred before the April 2012 elections in Aceh, it became peaceful during the voting and after the results of the election were announced. The elections of 2012 in Timor-Leste were also peaceful. Secondly,

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democratic processes are unlikely to be effective in supporting peace-building without prioritising overcoming fundamental economic challenges such as poverty and the slow progress of development, and the transformation of the orientation of former combatants involved in criminal activities. In conclusion, the paper argues that the peaceful democratic transitions achieved in Aceh and Timor-Leste can provide important lessons for peace-building in Asia, Africa and other conflict and post-conflict countries.

### **Theoretical debates**

Immanuel Kant's theory of "perpetual peace" argues that ideals of peace are nothing without realisation. It has been stated that "the irony of peace is the relative ease by which one can define it *a priori* at the same time as it is so difficult to realise" (Rasmussen 2010, 177). Nevertheless, Rasmussen has argued that peace agreements can be a starting point towards lasting and permanent peace. Peace, he believes, should be the ultimate goal of every movement, including the aim of war and military intervention (Rasmussen 2010, 179). The UN Security Council, for instance, could authorise "war in the name of international peace and security" (Rasmussen 2010, 179). Rasmussen's support of the ideology of peace, however, leaves questions about the nature of 'peace'. In Iraq, for instance, despite the democratic transition, deadly attacks still occur against the so-called legitimate government long after the war.

In conflict regions that emerged in Indonesia after the fall of the New Order in 1998, existing fragile relations among ethnic and religious groups escalated into bitter ethno-religious clashes after the 1999 elections, leaving more than 5000 Muslims and Christians dead in Maluku and Poso, Central Sulawesi. Political campaigns and the strategies of different parties created further waves of violence in the conflict regions (Loveband & Yong 2006, 145; van Klinken 2006, 131). After the election results became known, violent attacks broke out in Maluku which have been referred to as 'phase three conflicts' and attracted volunteer fighters from other islands to the region (Sholeh 2007, 146; van Klinken 2007, 89). Ruptures in fragile inter-communal relations in the conflict regions of Maluku and Poso were easily provoked by intensifying shootings that targeted different religious groups. People from different religious communities who used to live together peacefully were forced to separate into distinct Muslim and Christian regions. For many of them the trauma of conflict continues, as religious difference forces clan members, former neighbours and even family members to live separately.

Due to ethnic, religious and separatist conflicts that occurred after the resignation of President Suharto in 1998, some analysts suggested that Indonesia should move towards developing into a federation. The result of the referendum in Timor-Leste held on 30 August 1999 contributed to a rise in demands for autonomy, accompanied by regional protests and violence, particularly in Aceh and West Papua. Student activists in Aceh mobilised people and campaigned for a referendum on the status of Aceh. On 8 November 1999, several hundred thousand people in Aceh gathered to protest against Jakarta in support of the implementation of Aceh's special political status which had been verbally agreed to by President Abdurrahman Wahid but later revoked by the TNI (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, the Indonesian armed forces) (Kingsbury 2006, 10). Although President B.J. Habibie made it clear that a referendum like that of Timor-Leste would not be offered to Aceh (Aspinall & Crouch 2003, 6), Fuad Mardatillah, an Acehnese activist, said that the Timor-Leste referendum was an important inspiration for Aceh students and young activists. The movement in support of Aceh autonomy had as one important outcome the development of peace initiatives between the Free Aceh Movement and the Republic of Indonesia, mediated by the Henry Dunant Centre (Mardatillah 2013).

Some elites who have political interests gain support from their constituents by prolonging anger, hatred and negative sentiments against other groups, which is counterproductive to the essence of peace-building. Some of them have even attacked and killed leaders of other political groups for political purposes, for example, what happened in Aceh approaching the April 2012 elections. The International Crisis Group (2012) warned that Aceh's political violence could affect the process of reconciliation and peacebuilding. Intellectuals and scholars committed to vote for a certain party in Aceh to preserve stability and peace; they said it was dangerous not to vote for the Aceh Party, the dominant party in the province of Aceh. They believed that "the danger of violence would be higher if the Aceh Party lost" (ICG 2012, p. 6).

An increase in killings in late 2011 forced the central government to accommodate the political purposes of the Aceh Party. Major General (ret.) Amiruddin Usman, the Aceh desk coordinator at the Coordinating Ministry of Political, Legal and Security Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, has said that Jakarta is serious about maintaining reconciliation and peace in Aceh (Afrida 2012). According to Amiruddin, the central government changed its policy towards the Aceh election and allowed the Aceh Party to join the election (Usman 2013). This sense of trauma also appeared in Timor-Leste during the 2012 elections when the people voted for stability and peace.

This suggests that, like democracy, which can generate the participation of the people if they are confident of finding strong representatives, violence in one region can act as a fuse to instigate violence in other regions. Messages of anger from political and community leaders can lead to violence, especially in fragile post-conflict and post-war regions.

Therefore, in other conflict regions like Africa, peace is prioritised over democracy. After three elections between 1992 and 2007 characterised by violent bloodshed, Kenyans changed in their 2013 elections to choose peace over democracy. Long et al. (2013, 142) argued that in the 2013 elections in Kenya “peace is obviously preferable to violence, it does not necessarily indicate a fully democratic process”. Lasting peace is also a hard challenge to realise in post-conflict regions in Southeast Asia, particularly in Aceh and Timor-Leste.

## **Democratic transition**

In some post-conflict regions, democracy leads to new types of conflicts, which turn out to be worse than before a peace accord was instituted. African regions experienced such a worsened conflict situation after democratic elections were set up which gave the opportunity for former leaders of combatants and armed militias to participate as candidates for parliament and heads of districts and states. Among the many challenges to peace following elections is the continuation of friction inside former insurgent movements. Leaders of the movement who disagree with the peace accord often create new insurgents and more deadly groups after an election. The Moro Islamic Liberation Movement (MILF), for example, is a group which opposed the peace initiatives and agreements negotiated between the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and the government of the Republic of the Philippines in 1996. However, they eventually made their peace initiatives a few years later and signed an agreement in 2012 including significant steps for implementation of the peace accord. This occurred after the MILF learned from democratic peace-building in Aceh; the MILF leadership sent several representatives of civil society organisations, local government and former insurgent leaders to Aceh to understand how the Free Aceh Movement successfully transformed and how democracy works in Aceh. Although violence continued during elections in 2006, 2009 and 2012 and threatens the quality of democracy in Aceh, it is clear that stability and economic development were achieved after the elections.

The 2012 elections in Aceh and Timor-Leste are important to analyse, particularly in terms of how the dynamics of politics in the regions have contributed to peace-building and reconciliation. It is also interesting to see how former members of armed forces and combatants in both post-conflict regions participated in the elections. The results of the elections show significant victories for former armed forces members and combatants. In Aceh, the former foreign minister of GAM, Zaini Abdullah, in partnership with the former commander of the military wing of GAM, Muzakir Manaf, won the elections with 55.87 % of the votes for their Aceh Party. However, there was a lot of pre-election intimidation by supporters of the Aceh Party. Between 2011 and 2012, former members of GAM have turned to fighting each other and supporting different parties. A series of shootings, bombings and attacks have targeted political figures and their supporters (*The Economist*, 14 April 2012) and about 20 people killed in violence related to the election. Former GAM combatants were involved in the violence and have been charged with up to 19 years in prison under laws of counter-terrorism. A human rights activist has argued that the violence has political motives and therefore should not be categorised as terrorism (Ghozali 2013). Irwandi Yusuf, former governor of Aceh and former chief of information of GAM, was targeted by the group and they twice attempted to kill him. Irwandi said that “this is strongly coordinated by elites of Party Aceh, who are

also former leaders of GAM. They are afraid of fair competition in the 2012 elections against me as an incumbent” (Yusuf 2013).

However, Ayah Banta, former chief of the GAM specialist explosive group from Aceh Utara, has argued that his group’s attacks before the 2012 election were purely the result of their disappointment with Irwandi’s government policy, which “does not fulfil his own promise to support the prosperity of former combatants” (Advocate member 2013). Shortly after the election, GAM members were arrested and are now imprisoned in Jakarta and Banda Aceh. According to Irwandi Yusuf (2013), former combatants are fragile individuals, especially those who do not have the capacity to compete for jobs and did not have the chance to complete their studies. Many of them did not finish school due to the conflicts and their involvement with GAM.

The dynamics of politics in Timor-Leste have been more positive in democratic consolidation and political reconciliation. After independence was gained in 2002, Timor-Leste struggled with friction among former leaders and particularly division among former members of the armed forces for the National Liberation of East Timor (FALINTIL guerrillas between Westerners (*loromonu*) and Easterners (*lorosae*). Allegations of government discrimination towards FALINTIL veterans created national security threats which led to more than a hundred thousand internally displaced persons. This friction was made worse by antagonism in the political leadership between Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri and President Xanana Gusmão (ICG 2006). After the 2007 elections that resulted in a coalition government between Prime Minister José Ramos Horta and President Gusmão, a more peaceful and stable government was created. However, a security threat from deserters continued in 2008. It was reported that the F-FDTL fugitive Major Alfredo Reinado almost killed Prime Minister Horta on 11 February 2008 and President Gusmão’s car was shot by Reinado’s second-in-command, Lieutenant Gastão Salsinha, an hour after Reinado’s attack on Horta (Kingsbury 2008, 33). The friction among FALINTIL veterans is among the challenges that need to be overcome.

Democratic consolidation continued after Prime Minister Gusmão successfully achieved his second term of coalition government in the 2012 election. This consolidation has been further strengthened by the victory of his close aide, Taur Matar Ruak, as President. Stability is also continuing since Prime Minister Gusmão’s positive political approach to mandate former Prime Minister Alkatiri to lead the Task Force of a Special Zone of the Social Market Economy in Oecusse Ambeno with the objective of giving a new perspective for the future, especially with regard to economic growth, employment and poverty eradication (Tempo Semanal 2013). As secretary-general of the FRETILIN party, Alkatiri maintains influential leadership at the grassroots level. People see this as the principle of national reconciliation in action among strategic leaders. On the current challenges of Timor-Leste, Gusmão has stated that “we (Timorese) lacked infrastructure, human and financial resources and political experience in democratic governance. Coupled with the impact of trauma, poverty and historical division, the fragile nation of Timor-Leste begin its history with a cycle of unrest and violence” (Gusmão 2012, 208). All leaders of Timor-Leste are obliged to manage a stable and economically independent state of Timor-Leste, which enables it to be an influential member of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Timor-Leste also provides an important lesson for democratic transition in Aceh. Part of this is the foundation of the Commission of Truth and Friendship, which does not meet the ideals of the human rights activists and local government of Aceh. They still propose the foundation of a strong commission of truth and reconciliation with the power of a local judicial process in Aceh.

## **Conclusion**

Democratic transitions in Aceh and Timor-Leste have proceeded quite peacefully compared to those of other post-conflict and post-war regions like Kenya, Africa. Aceh and Timor-Leste are consolidating democracies, with some challenges to overcome in some sectors. Trauma, poverty, unemployment and historical divisions, as warned by Gusmão (2012), are among crucial agenda items in the future for both Aceh and Timor-Leste. The ICG (2011) reported that there are now violent conflicts in Aceh of combatants versus combatants. Irwandi has founded a new party, the Aceh National Party (PNA), which is the strongest

competitor to the current government Aceh Party (PA). The leadership of Aceh combatants is still very influential at the grassroots level. Fewer attacks and killings occurred in Aceh after the 2012 election. However, it has been estimated the violence might increase around the time of the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections if all political parties do not prioritise peace over politics.

It is the task and obligation of Aceh and Timor-Leste political and community leaders to take their regions towards prosperous, democratic and peaceful futures. Gusmão's strategy of accommodating the political leadership of former Prime Minister Alkatiri is considered by Aniceto Guterres, Member of the National Parliament and Head of the FRETILIN Party fraction, to be a crucial symbol of leadership reconciliation which will greatly impact on the grassroots level (Guterres 2013). The unity of political leaders in Timor-Leste is an important factor in the strengthening of development and peace-building. This is in contrast to the political facts in Aceh, where political frictions are contributing to the slow progress of development. In Aceh, the people are traumatised by threats of violence from former combatants whose commanders and leaders are managing governments in the provinces and districts of Aceh.

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