



# Analysis: Aceh's non-federation with Indonesia

BY DAMIEN KINGSBURY

**When** the Aceh peace agreement was signed in Helsinki on August 15, 2005, it ended 28 years of conflict in that Indonesian territory. The signatories to the agreement were the Indonesian government and the rebel group in Aceh, the Free Aceh Movement or *Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, better known by its initials GAM. For an outcome that employed the ideas of both federalism and autonomy, the agreement studiously avoided both these terms. The term “autonomy” was unacceptable to GAM because it denoted the status quo, while federalism posed a direct challenge to the unitary nature of the Indonesian state.

At certain times in a country's history, political appearances are often more important than reality. So what is said in Indonesia today does not necessarily correspond to what exists. Hence the Aceh peace agreement described an autonomous, federated relationship, but refused to call it that.

The conflict which was ended by the Aceh peace agreement started in 1976. That was when GAM rose up against the Indonesian state, re-asserting the pre-Dutch, independent status of Aceh. After GAM began its military actions, the Indonesian government and its military responded, leaving more than 15,000 dead, thousands of homes destroyed and a population of a little over four million in terror.

## “Special autonomy”

In 2002, following the 32-year reign of President Suharto, Aceh was nominally granted special autonomy, as well the other territory of Papua (most of the west half of the island of New Guinea, across from now-independent Papua New Guinea) under a program of political reform that recognized their historical status.

In the rest of Indonesia, measures aimed at bringing about certain levels of regional autonomy devolved some political and economic authority to the sub-provincial district level. The intent was to alleviate over-centralization and a lack of responsiveness while ensuring that autonomous districts remained too small to be independently viable.

The special autonomy granted to Aceh and Papua differed in that it devolved authority to the province rather than the district. This was meant to placate separatist sentiments. In reality, little of the income from these resource-rich provinces remained within them, a high level of centralized

political control continued and there was an increase in already high military activity.

GAM thus rejected the notion of special autonomy, claiming it to be a sham. Thus, any peace agreement to be reached in Helsinki could not include this word.

From the Indonesian government perspective, the term federalism was equally problematic. Indonesia was established as a federation in 1949, but federalism was ended the following year. Its critics claimed it was unworkable and served as a front for continuing Dutch colonial interests.

Generally, federalism is held to be an appropriate model for polities in which there is a relatively high degree of pre-established local political identity, but increasingly also a wider political commonality.

Indonesia spans eight major island groups and some 13,000 inhabited islands, with more than a dozen major languages and 350 or so minor ones. Its main point of commonality is its colonial history. The Netherlands — who as a colonial power ruled Indonesia from 1700 to 1949 — established federal states there between 1946 and 1949 as a counterweight to the Republic of Indonesia that Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta had proclaimed in August 1945 after the end of the Second World War. In December 1949, (Dutch) federal Indonesia had 16 partner-states and autonomous territories. Indonesian nationalists saw this federal structure as an instrument of Dutch imperialism, another example of the old imperial principle of “divide and rule”. Against this background, though Indonesia could have been an ideal candidate for federalism, the Republic of Indonesia reconstructed itself as a unitary state in 1950.

From 1950, Indonesia was recast not just as a unitary state but, in a sense, as a recreation of the thirteenth century Javanese Majapahit Empire. Indonesian school children still learn of its imperial glories from their history books. But there was and remains little room in an empire for a relationship between equals.

It is not surprising, then, that no sooner had the Indonesian government in Jakarta collapsed Indonesia's federal structure than South Sulawesi and then Ambon rose in separatist revolt. The Indonesian military quickly prevailed, but the rebellions cemented in the minds of the army officer corps the idea that federalism was a threat to the unity of the state. Indonesia would have to be held together and a nation created, they believed, by force if necessary.



Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

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Aceh's involvement in a wider Islamic-inspired rebellion from 1953 and another regionally-based rebellion in 1958 also added to Indonesia's sense of state insecurity. The periphery, it seemed, could not be trusted. Following the defeat of these rebellions, Indonesia shifted from parliamentary democracy to an executive presidency, further centralizing political authority.

### **Federalism vs. a unitary Indonesia**

After the fall of President Suharto in 1998 and in light of what was increasingly seen as the failure of Indonesia's national project, a leading anti-Suharto political figure, Amien Rais, briefly and unsuccessfully flirted with a proposal to re-establish Indonesia as a federal state. Rais, the speaker of Indonesia's upper house of the legislature from 1998 to 2004, was chair of the National Mandate Party and the former leader of one of the largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia. He ran for president in 2004 but came in fourth, with just 15 per cent of the vote.

However, it was also around this time that East Timor began to look like it might have its own relationship with Indonesia recast. East Timor was invaded by Indonesia in 1975 and integrated in 1976, both acts in defiance of international law. Responding to the possibility of East Timor's separation, the army initiated both a covert military campaign against it and stepped up its rhetoric of asserting that the unity of the state is of capital importance. The rhetorical term used to assert state unity was Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia (NKRI), the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.

NKRI became a military and nationalist mantra, especially after East Timor's separation in October 1999. In Aceh, the army insisted that public servants not only swear an oath of allegiance to NKRI, but also be tested on its meaning. The answer to the perceived threats of political plurality, it seemed, was to reassert the unitary state.

Given Indonesia's delicate democratic transition and the continuing influence that the army played in politics, no Indonesian politician would ever say in public that Indonesia was anything other than a unitary state. During the Aceh peace talks it was impossible for Indonesian government negotiators to accept, much less propose, any political solution that challenged the rhetorical validity of NKRI. Federalism was an unacceptable term.

### **GAM gives up independence for autonomy**

In reaching an agreement, GAM gave up its claim for independence in exchange for a high degree of genuine autonomy. The Indonesian government agreed in practice to allow Aceh semi-independence, and hence a functionally federated status.

In the heady days following the signing of the Aceh peace agreement, there was widespread discussion in the Indonesian media that it could constitute a way forward for political relations between Jakarta and the rest of the state.

In particular, a question that quickly arose was whether the similarly troubled province of Papua could also achieve an Aceh-like agreement. Further, the question went, if this was possible, would this not open the way for Indonesia to become a genuine federation?

Before this question could be addressed, Indonesia's president, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono — a former general who served in East Timor in the 1970s — and some leading politicians in the Indonesian legislature pushed through the division of Papua into three provinces. A subsequent Constitutional Court ruling allowed two of the divisions, with the third case pending.

The claimed intention of this move was to better allocate resources within Papua. However, the move appeared to be designed to isolate and better control Papuan separatist sentiment. One of the key objectives of the policy of dividing Papua into three or more provinces was to prevent the implementation of the Papua version of Special Autonomy. The advocates of division feared that such a move would empower a local elite who they suspected would use autonomy to push for independence.

Given this division, Papua's capacity to negotiate an Aceh-like agreement now seems remote.

After a promising earlier start, indigenous Papuans did not achieve a high degree of internal cohesion. Unifying leaders have been rare. The charismatic leader, Theys Eluay, was murdered by army special forces troops in 2001, and more recent candidates became political exiles and one of them suffered a serious stroke.

For the rest of Indonesia, reverting to a federal structure would require the other Indonesian provinces to press for a new political arrangement, based on concessions to demands for devolution or separatism. Such claims are heard in Indonesia, but not with much conviction and rarely with any force. And the Indonesian army has made it clear that it will respond harshly to such initiatives.

### **Could a federal Indonesia emerge?**

Given that the Indonesian government is playing a delicate game of trying to reduce the effective independence of the military, it is most unlikely to initiate any move that would bring it into direct confrontation with the armed forces. In this, it is worth remembering that current President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is a former army major-general.

Federalism could be a logical proposition for Indonesia, given its fragmented geography and cultures, and its largely separate pre-colonial history. But the forces arrayed against federalism are substantial and, for the foreseeable future, probably overwhelming.

Assuming the intention of the Aceh peace agreement is manifested in reality, Aceh will have achieved a functional federated relationship with Jakarta. This has been achieved, though, by a costly guerilla war waged by the Acehnese and a willingness to negotiate for something less than complete independence. Their example could inspire others to push for local autonomy.

But the chances of federalism — as opposed to local autonomy — are slim. Because of a lack of local commitment, the vehement opposition of the Indonesian army and the nationalist fervor of opportunist politicians in Jakarta, such a federation — rhetorical or functional — no longer appears likely elsewhere in Indonesia. (6)