

From Islamism to nationalism in Aceh, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT. This article analyses a dramatic political transformation in Indonesia's Aceh province. In the 1950s, an Islamic rebellion (*Darul Islam*) aimed not to separate Aceh from Indonesia, but rather to make Indonesia an Islamic state. A successor movement from the 1970s was GAM, the Free Aceh Movement. GAM, however, was essentially secular-nationalist in orientation, sought Aceh's complete independence and did not espouse formal Islamic goals. The transformation is explained by various factors, but the key argument concerns the relationship between Islam and nationalism. The defeat of *Darul Islam* had caused Aceh's Islamic leaders to focus on what they could achieve in Aceh alone, ultimately giving rise to Acehnese nationalism and the secessionist goal. However, Islam remained a point of commonality with, rather than difference from, majority-Muslim Indonesia. The logic of nationalist identity construction and differentiation thus caused Aceh's separatist leaders, despite being personally devout, to increasingly downplay Islamic symbols and ideology.

KEYWORDS: Aceh, GAM, Indonesia, Islam, nationalism.

In an era of allegedly clashing civilisations, the province of Aceh in Indonesia presents something of an anomaly. For reasons of history and sociology, it would appear that Aceh should be a major centre for the militant Islamist groups which have recently proliferated in Indonesia. The territory has a well-established reputation for the piety of its inhabitants and a long history of Islamic militancy. Yet the major oppositional force in Aceh in recent years has been nationalism of an essentially secular type.

In the late nineteenth century, Aceh's religious scholars, the *ulama*, led a popular and bitter holy war against Dutch colonial expansion. In the 1950s, it was the turn of the infant Republic of Indonesia to face armed resistance directed by the *ulama*, when they led large numbers of Acehnese into the *Darul Islam* (Abode of Islam) revolt. The rebels had local goals, but they also aimed, in affiliation with kindred movements elsewhere in the country, to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state. Another long-running insurgency began in Aceh in 1976 and re-ignited after the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998. For a brief period, guerrillas controlled most of rural Aceh. The conflict resulted in several thousand deaths before it was brought to an end, for a time at least, by negotiations in 2005.

In the late 1990s, the international press sometimes suggested that the main separatist organisation, GAM (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, Free Aceh Movement) was an 'Islamic fundamentalist' group, or, at least, that the Indonesian government depicted and denigrated it in this way. In fact, the reverse was closer to the truth. Despite the global wave of Islamisation which had lapped on Indonesian shores in recent decades, resistance to the government in Aceh was no longer largely expressed in Islamic terms. Instead, GAM's claims were similar to those of separatist nationalist movements everywhere: Aceh had an inalienable right to independence by virtue of its glorious history, the distinct identity of its people, and its historic sovereignty. GAM's discourse was suffused with Islamic references, but its leaders tried to distance the movement from its Islamist origins. They denied that they had links with global *jihadists*, said they did not seek an Islamic state, and attacked Islamist rivals. To compound the irony, representatives of the Indonesian state, traditionally seen as a bulwark against Islamism, excoriated the insurgents for being secular and hostile to religion and began to implement *shari'a* in Aceh.

In much of the Islamic world, popular opposition became more overtly religious in recent decades. This article analyses why Aceh bucks this global trend. It identifies several important local factors that must be taken into account. The central argument, however, concerns a question of general relevance: the relationship between Islam and nationalism.

Mainstream Islamic thought has long reconciled itself with nationalism and a world of nation-states (Piscatori 1986). Even so, some radical Islamist thinkers violently condemn nationalism, and some political conflicts in the Islamic world today are garbed in pan-Islamic, universalist rhetoric. In practice, however, these conflicts are mostly between rival Islamist and secular nationalisms. As Gelvin (1999: 74) points out, this should not surprise us if we view nationalism not as a 'reification of some immutable and undifferentiated ideal' but rather (here Gelvin cites Duara 1995: 8) as a 'site where different representations of the nation contest and negotiate with each other'.

The discussion of Aceh in the following pages demonstrates that just as the nation may be a terrain of contestation for rival Islamist and secular visions, Islam, too, may become an arena for conflict between rival nationalisms. Although both Indonesian nationalists and Acehnese secessionists claimed secular justification, both also made religious appeals and mobilised religious doctrine to bolster their conflicting nationalist claims. There is no doubt, however, that over time the Islamic element gradually became less important for most Acehnese nationalists. Acehnese nationalist discourse continued to reflect Aceh's Islamic social environment, but Islamic ideology became less central to nationalist arguments, goals and strategies.

Most studies of the relationship between Islam and secessionist nationalism focus on places where Muslim minorities seek to break away from majority non-Muslim states. Literature on secessionist movements in Kashmir and the Southern Philippines, for example, demonstrates that Islam in such places is readily mobilised as an identity marker reinforcing a sense of national

separateness (Sikand 2001; McKenna 1998). Some scholars go further, and suggest that elements of Islamic doctrine encourage or even compel separatism in such communities. On the basis of a study of the Indian partition, Robinson (1979: 83) suggested that 'The particular aspect of the Islamic tradition which bears on the tendency of Muslims to organize on the basis of their faith in politics is the emphasis it places on the idea of community.' This idea of community, combined with several other elements of the Islamic tradition, in Robinson's view, produces a tendency toward political separatism in Muslim minorities:

The ideas associated with creating and sustaining 'the best nation raised up by men' contained in the Islamic tradition (that Muslims form part of a community, that the laws of the community are God-given; that it is the duty of the ruler to put them into effect; that he must have the power to do so; that all Muslims are brothers; and that they are distinct from and superior to non-Muslims) have continually influenced many north Indian Muslims toward trying to realize the ideal religio-political community. Moreover, as a minority in the midst of idolators, abiding concerns were both to draw sharp distinctions between the idolators and themselves and to ensure that Islam lived hand in hand with power. (Robinson 1979: 104).

The following discussion suggests, however, that aspects of Islamic doctrine which may bolster separatist claims where a Muslim minority seeks to break away from a majority non-Muslim state, are amenable to being used *against* separatism where both the separatist minority and the non-separatist majority are Muslim. Islam was a point of commonality, not difference, between Aceh and Indonesia. Arguments based on Islamic solidarity tended to bind the two entities together, rather than driving them apart. As a result, once Acehnese nationalist leaders made the fateful move to aim for a separate state, the logic of identity differentiation led them away from their Islamic roots. It was this logic which accounts for the secularisation of dissent in Aceh.

Islam and the origins of rebellion

To begin, it is helpful to review the part played by Islam in the development of Acehnese identity. Almost all Acehnese today agree that being Acehnese is inseparable from being Muslim: 'Aceh is identical with Islam', is a phrase the foreign researcher hears repeatedly when in the territory. This interpenetration of Acehnese and Islamic identity has deep historical roots. Aceh's location at the north-western tip of Sumatra made it the first point of contact for Arab and Indian traders visiting the archipelago, and many historians consider it to be the site of the first significant conversions to Islam in the region. The oldest known Islamic kingdom in Southeast Asia was in Pasai (near present-day Lhokseumawe) in the late thirteenth century. Aceh became an important power in the Malacca Straits from the early sixteenth century, when several 'sharply divided states were . . . united as part of the reaction to the Portuguese intrusion' (Reid 1969: 2). For centuries, Aceh was not only an important military force, but also a centre of Islamic learning and trade.

The contemporary identification of Acehnese and Islamic identity can most of all be traced to the Dutch war (1873–c.1903). As the Dutch slowly gained ground in this grinding and bloody colonial conflict, leadership of the armed resistance passed from the traditional chiefly caste, the *uleebalang*, to the *ulama*. By adopting a more uncompromising stance and depicting their struggle in an Islamic idiom, they were able to provide a unifying glue for Acehnese resistance. They led the most determined armed bands, and produced a rich popular literature (the *hikayat perang sabil* or ‘epic of the holy war’) which explained how martyrs in the struggle would be rewarded with the delights of paradise (Siegel 1979). This was a war typical of a pre-national age, expressed in the language of pan-Islam. The main theme of the *hikayat perang sabil* and other epics is not defending Aceh, but prosecuting holy war against infidels.

The *ulama* were not only concerned, however, with resisting the invaders. They also sought to Islamise society. In this endeavour, their main rivals were the *uleebalang*, whom the *ulama* castigated not only for collaborating with the Dutch, but also for their impiety. After the Dutch achieved military victory, they used the *uleebalang* to govern the territory. Tension deepened between them and the *ulama*, who largely withdrew into the world of the *dayah* (religious schools) and, in Reid’s (1969: 282) words, continued to teach ‘negative *kafir*–hate’.

The long war, and the destruction and conquest it brought in its wake, weakened the networks that connected Acehnese Muslims to their co-religionists elsewhere. Acehnese became more inward-looking, especially when they saw Muslims from other parts of the archipelago working with the Dutch:

For the overwhelming majority of Acehnese ... [e]ven the bond of Islam was insufficient to outweigh the prejudices against Indonesians who had come to Aceh as agents or camp-followers of the conquering *Kompeuni* [‘Company’: the Acehnese phrase for the Dutch]. In the 1920s, the 8,000 Minangkabaus in Aceh were still apt to be dismissed contemptuously as *kaphé Padang* [*kafir* from Padang], no matter how strictly they observed their religious duties. Although Islamic movements had more chance of interesting Acehnese than secular ones, it was a long uphill struggle. (Reid 1979: 19–20)

Partly as a result of such attitudes, as Reid explains, the Islamic organisations which began to bind Muslims together in other parts of the Dutch East Indies during the first decades of the twentieth century had difficulties striking deep roots in Aceh. The Muhammadiyah organisation, for example, which elsewhere became the main vehicle for the Islamic modernist ideas then emanating from the Middle East, did not gain much support in Aceh, where it was seen as a vehicle for West Sumatran and *uleebalang* interests.

Instead, the first major expression of Islamic reform in the territory was a purely local affair. This was PUSA (*Persatuan Ulama Seluruh Aceh*, All-Aceh Association of Ulama) which was formed in 1939 and rapidly attracted a large mass following. PUSA formally aimed to develop a modern Islamic education system in Aceh. It could not openly oppose the Dutch, but its leaders spoke of

the past golden age of the Acehese Sultanate. Their aim, however, was not to 'restore an idealized version of this "golden age"', but rather to attain a 'glorious future, where all Muslims would be united through religious law . . . ' (Morris 1983: 84). In the words of its first public statement, the organisation sought:

. . . to proclaim, uphold and defend the greatness of the holy Islamic religion, especially in the land of ACEH, which had bestowed upon it the name of 'MECCA'S VERANDAH' in its past golden age, but which for some time now has become a country left far behind by its near neighbours, let alone those more distant, and which has for so long remained in the valley of unbelief and darkness. (Arif c. 1951: 18; capitalisation in original)

Yet the PUSA *ulama* were not hostile to the emerging idea of Indonesia. On the contrary, they saw little conflict between Acehese, Indonesian and Islamic interests and identities. During Indonesia's independence revolution (1945–49), the *ulama*, in the words of a famous declaration made by four of their number in October 1945, proclaimed that the Acehese population was 'firmly united and obediently standing behind the great leader Ir. [Engineer] Sukarno' (El-Ibrahimi 2001: 289). The statement also described Indonesia's independence cause as a 'continuation of the past struggle in Aceh led by the late Tgk. Tjihik di Tiro [a pre-eminent fighting *ulama* of the late nineteenth century] and the other national heroes'. It also warned the population about Dutch designs: 'They will enslave the Indonesian people and make them their servants once more, and they will attempt to erase our holy Islamic religion and repress and obstruct the glory and prosperity of the Indonesian nation.' Acehese leaders at this time did not treat Acehese, Indonesian and Islamic goals as conceptually distinct.

During the revolution, however, Indonesia was still an abstract ideal. Aceh's leaders had unfettered control over local economic and political resources. They began to lose this control soon after the victory of the Republic, especially after the central government amalgamated Aceh into the province of North Sumatra in 1950. The resulting discontent fused with wider concerns about the adoption of Pancasila² rather than Islam as the philosophical basis of the state, leading in 1953 to Acehese participation in the *Darul Islam* revolt. Despite its many parochial motivations, this was not a secessionist movement. Instead, the movement's leader Daud Beureueh (the former head of PUSA and leader of Aceh during the independence revolution) stated that Aceh was part of the *Negara Islam Indonesia* (Islamic State of Indonesia) headed by another Islamic rebel, Kartosuwirjo, in West Java. In his proclamation of the revolt, Daud insisted that the goal was implementation of *shari'a* for all Indonesia, not just Aceh: 'Belief in the One God is for us the very source of social life, and every single one of its directives must apply here on Indonesian soil' (Feith and Castles 1970: 212). In the words of two books authored by important Acehese *Darul Islam* leaders, the movement's goal was to 'Islamise this Indonesian Republic' (Gelanggang 1956: 10) or to 'Islamise the state and uphold the dignity of the Muslim people in Indonesia' (Saleh 1956: 83).

Nationalism delayed

So far, this is an unproblematic story. Most analyses of Acehnese history up to 1945 (e.g. Reid 1969; Siegel 1969) have an almost teleological aspect, by which *ulama*-led opposition to Dutch rule is depicted as part of the grand narrative of Indonesian nationalism. Episodes of Acehnese resistance are described as part of a process which would eventually and naturally give rise to Indonesian nationhood. Major works on *Darul Islam* (van Dijk 1981; Morris 1983; Sjamsuddin 1985; Sulaiman 1997), by contrast, focus on factors which drove the Acehnese to revolt, not those which underpinned their continued attachment to Indonesia.

In light of the later secessionist conflict, it is pertinent to ask why the tradition of Acehnese resistance produced participation in the Indonesian national project. After all, the *ulama* of the 1940s held a strong sense of distinct Acehnese identity and glorified the Acehnese past in a manner strikingly similar to later secessionists. Other preconditions for the emergence of a separate national identity and a modern nationalist movement were also surely fulfilled (e.g. intense disillusionment with central authorities and a strong alternative local leadership). Why was there no support for restoration of an Acehnese state in 1945–49? More to the point, why was there no demand for secession from Indonesia during the violent revolt of the 1950s?

The standard answer is that 'Indonesia' was a relatively empty concept when the *ulama* began to reconsolidate and lead opposition to the Dutch from the 1930s. Indonesia was an idea that cohered in opposition to colonial rule and around a shared sense of oppression by a single colonial overlord. The experience of the revolution reinforced this vague sense of common fate and sanctified it in blood. In the 1950s, disillusionment with the concept of Indonesia was simply not yet sufficiently intense as to prompt a complete break.

There is another way of looking at this, however. A chief factor which delayed the emergence of separate national sentiment was Islam. When Acehnese leaders filled the empty concept of 'Indonesia', they did so with Islam. First, Islamic organisational networks increasingly bound the Acehnese to their co-religionists elsewhere in the archipelago. PUSA might have been unusual in the Indies as a localised expression of Islamic modernism, but its leaders rapidly developed links with a 'national' scope even prior to the revolution (an early sign was PUSA's 1937 membership of the *Madjlisul Islamil a'laa Indonesia*, or Supreme Islamic Council of Indonesia, alongside organisations like *Muhammadiyah* and the Java-based traditionalist *Nadhlatul Ulama*). During the revolution, PUSA itself began to fade away as its members joined the bureaucracy, army or Indonesia-wide, usually Islamic, political organisations. There was no concerted effort to revive PUSA after the revolution: instead, Aceh's leaders worked through and supported Indonesia-wide Islamic organisations such as the major modernist party, *Masjumi*. In sum, to the extent that the Acehnese *were* integrated politically

into the Indonesian national community, they were integrated via Islamic networks.

Second, Acehnese leaders viewed Islam as the cultural substratum which they shared with the wider Indonesian national community. As Hasan Tiro (later the founder of GAM) put it in a book he wrote in 1958 when he still identified with the *Darul Islam* cause:

Islam has a position which is very special in the life of Indonesian nationalism, because Islam is the *only* force which unites a majority of the peoples of Indonesia, whose environment, history, nationalities, languages, economic interests, politics and traditions and customs had never known that unity (Tiro 1958: 36).

Third, and extending on this, the emphasis on the unity, universality and equality of the *ummah*, regardless of race, tribal and other affiliations (precisely those ideas which Robinson argues may contribute to separatism among Muslim minorities), influenced the outlook of Aceh's leaders. They aspired to a national state which was based not only on Islamic precepts, but also on the largest community of the pious practicably attainable. In the 1940s, this project was represented by Indonesia; in the 1950s, by *Darul Islam*. When talking of their commitment to Indonesia, Aceh's rebel leaders often spoke in terms of *ukhuwah Islamiyah*: 'Islamic brotherhood'. Thus, in the book cited above, Hasan Tiro stressed that Indonesian unity was based not on economic or material foundations, but rather on 'unity of the spirit, unity of the soul . . . on the Islamic religion, on *ukhuwah Islamiyah* which ties over 90% of the nations of Indonesia to one another' (*ibid.*: 43). Similarly, Daud Beureueh in 1961 explained that Acehnese participation in *Darul Islam* had been based on 'the foundation of *ukhuwah Islamiyah*' and 'solidarity with our brothers in struggle in West Java, Sulawesi, Kalimantan and elsewhere' (El-Ibrahimi 2001: 324–5).

In sum, if we think of Aceh as a case of 'delayed nationalism', it was primarily Islamic networks and ideas which caused the delay.³ During the 1950s, the bonds of Islam remained sufficiently strong to tie the Acehnese to the idea of Indonesia, at the very time when their failure to achieve their Islamic goals drove them into revolt.

GAM, Islam and nationalism

By the late 1990s, an Acehnese nationalism had emerged which was both more secular and overtly secessionist. This new nationalism was the product of a long history of defeats for Islamic forces in the territory. The century after the Dutch invasion had seen a gradual narrowing of the Islamic horizons of Aceh's leaders. Dutch victory ended the efforts of the nineteenth-century *ulama* to generate pan-Islamic support for their struggle. The Netherlands East Indies became the administrative and territorial framework within which unity against colonial domination would now be imagined. The Acehnese slowly developed links with co-religionists in other parts of the colony, and

the idea of Indonesia became an organising framework for opposition to the Dutch. After the Acehnese became disillusioned with the outcome of the national revolution, *Darul Islam* aimed to establish all of Indonesia on an Islamic foundation. Then, as the movement ran into military difficulties, 'Daud Beureueh concentrated more and more on the question of Aceh's autonomy at the expense of the general question of the status of Islam in Indonesia as a whole.' (Christie 1996: 156). The defeat of *Darul Islam* further narrowed the focus of Aceh's Islamic leaders on to what could be achieved in Aceh alone. The negotiations which brought the rebellion to an end produced a compromise involving 'special territory' status for Aceh, under which the Acehnese were permitted to govern themselves on, *inter alia*, religious matters. As Morris (1983: 229; see also Bertrand 2004: 168) argues, the 'Special Territory' compromise meant that the Acehnese leaders agreed to 'regionalise' their demands. The archipelago-wide battle over *shari'a* and the philosophical basis of the Indonesian state had been lost; special status held out the promise of implementing *shari'a* within Aceh alone.

The fate of this compromise formula disappointed many of its early supporters. In the late 1960s, Aceh's leaders tried to enshrine *shari'a* in provincial legislation and to integrate state and religious schooling systems, but Jakarta vetoed these attempts (Morris 1983: 269–82). The Suharto government was then establishing a centralised and authoritarian system of rule, with little scope for policies reflecting local political or cultural aspirations. It was also becoming increasingly hostile towards advocates of formal Islamic politics.

How did the formation of GAM as a secessionist movement in 1976 fit into this picture? Just as in the 1950s, various political and economic factors, many not connected to Islamic politics, contributed to the birth of the insurgency. Especially important early on was the discovery of substantial natural gas reserves in Aceh and, subsequently, widespread perceptions that they were being exploited without benefiting local people. Later, brutal counter-insurgency operations intensified popular support for GAM. These factors have been widely canvassed in other literature (Kell 1995; Robinson 1998; Schulze 2004) and need not detain us here. Our current focus is the connection of GAM to the evolving politics of Islam.

In many ways, GAM represented the culmination of the gradual narrowing of Aceh's Islamic options. There was a strong thread connecting GAM with previous Islamic resistance. GAM's founder and leader, Hasan Tiro, was a protégé of Daud Beureueh, having studied at the PUSA leader's *madrasah* as a child. He was also the great-grandson of Tengku Chik di Tiro, the venerated *ulama* who led resistance to the Dutch in the nineteenth century. In a 1954, while living in New York as a student at Columbia University and a staff member at the Indonesian consulate, he threw in his lot with *Darul Islam* and declared himself its ambassador. During two decades in exile he maintained links with his *Darul Islam* colleagues, but his views slowly changed and he began to believe that Aceh should be independent. When he re-entered Aceh

and established GAM in 1976, the organisation's first 'cabinet' mostly consisted of a younger generation of intellectuals educated in secular institutions. But almost without exception their fathers had been active in *Darul Islam*. Many of GAM's military leaders were *Darul Islam* veterans. According to one of the movement's founders, ordinary villagers who supported GAM early on did so simply because they saw it as a continuation of *Darul Islam* (Daud Husein, interview, 12 July 2002). Moreover, Daud Beureueh, himself an old man by the 1970s, declared his support for Hasan Tiro at a meeting in a mosque in his home town in the district of Pidie. According to the recollection of one elderly witness interviewed in Aceh in 2001, at this event Daud conferred on the younger man the 'duty' to lead the struggle to 'uphold the Islamic state in Aceh' (see also Nessen 2006: 184–5).

During the 1980s and early 1990s, leaders of GAM, as well as calling for Acehnese independence, continued to espouse formal Islamic goals in keeping with the *Darul Islam* tradition. After the Iranian revolution, GAM leaders also sought support in the Islamic world, trying first for Iranian backing, later getting military training from Muamar Ghadaffi's Libyan government. Depending on the audience they were addressing, Hasan Tiro and other GAM leaders sometimes still identified their movement as part of a worldwide struggle between Islamic forces and the West. In 1984, for example, Hasan addressed Muslim journalists in London on the topic of '385 Years of Confrontation Between Islam and *Kufr* [Unbelief] in Indonesia, 1599–1984', referring to 'the confrontation that has been going on in Southeast Asia from 1599 as fundamentally a conflict where no hold was barred between the predatory Western Christian civilisation and the Islamic civilisation.' (Tiro 1984: 5).

There was thus no sharp break between GAM and its Islamic roots, as some of the organisation's local Islamist critics later suggested (Al Chaidar 2000; Abu Jihad 2000). Even during GAM's resurgence after the fall of Suharto in 1998, the movement's grass-roots leaders continued to express themselves largely in an Islamic idiom when addressing their rural supporters. According to several informants who witnessed GAM 'sermons' in Acehnese villages from 1998, GAM propagandists not only discussed purely nationalist themes (Aceh's glorious history, the tyranny of 'Javanese' rule, supposed international support for the Acehnese cause, etc.); they also described their struggle as a religious duty and recited the *hikayat perang sabil*. Former GAM combatants interviewed in August 2006 stressed that training of GAM recruits always began with extended periods of religious study.

Nevertheless, GAM diverged from the path set out by *Darul Islam* in several ways. First, its leaders' reading of the international situation had a large impact. Some of those who split with Hasan Tiro and still professed commitment to *Darul Islam* ideals said that Hasan's desire to win Western support motivated him to abandon Islamic goals in the founding of GAM in 1976. Hasan's willingness to identify with a worldwide Islamic struggle in the 1980s makes this argument seem unconvincing. There is less doubt, however,

that a desire to attract Western support later had a large impact on GAM thinking. Key turning points were successful secessions in Eastern Europe in the early 1990s and, especially, the separation of East Timor from Indonesia in 1999, in which Western countries played crucial roles. By this time, opposition to Islamic radicalism had also become prominent the foreign policy of major Western powers. In the early 2000s, GAM leaders were frank in private meetings about the need to convince Western governments that they had no links to radical Islamic networks. Hence, for example, when the 11 September 2001 attacks took place in the United States, GAM leaders were quick to condemn them and disavow any sympathy for advocates of global *jihad*. When *jihadist* groups from other parts of Indonesia attempted to establish themselves in Aceh, GAM leaders threatened them and ordered them to leave the territory (*Serambi Indonesia*, 15 February 2002).

Second, the social background of GAM leaders differed from that of *Darul Islam* leaders. The older movement was primarily led by *ulama*, specialist religious scholars running Islamic educational institutions. After the decline of their revolt, most of the prominent *ulama* were increasingly drawn into Islamic networks that had their apex in Jakarta, and which thus militated against the development of strictly Acehnese-based visions, whether in favour of the government or critical of it. Some prominent *ulama* became involved in the provincial branch of the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Ulama Council), the corporatist body which eventually became the Suharto government's principal means of incorporating Islamic scholars within the regime's political structures. *Ulama* who were less sympathetic to the government and who still clung to the Islamic state ideal supported the *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (PPP, United Development Party), which the regime tolerated (but greatly constrained and manipulated) as a representative of Islamic interests in the political system.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the government devoted considerable energy to taming Aceh's unruly *ulama*, using a combination of subtle and not-so-subtle inducements, cajolery, and occasional repression. For some time, many resisted, with the result that the PPP remained stronger in Aceh than elsewhere in Indonesia, winning electoral victories there in 1977 (along with Jakarta) and 1982 (when Aceh was the only province where the government's Golkar party suffered a defeat). A turning point came in 1986, when a new governor provided funds for Islamic schools and mosque development programmes and led a concerted effort to Islamise the public image of Golkar in Aceh, including by recruiting several well-known *ulama* to campaign for it. The result was that Golkar finally won an electoral victory in the province in 1987, making its sweep of the country complete. From around this time, it became a commonplace observation in Aceh that the *ulama* had been successfully co-opted by the government and had lost some standing in the community.

Given this context, it is not surprising that GAM's social base and leadership increasingly diverged from the *Darul Islam* template. As noted

above, the first generation of GAM leaders in the 1970s had family ties to *Darul Islam*, but most were not from *ulama* families. By the 1980s, the movement increasingly relied upon poor village youths, many of whom were recruited while working in Malaysia. Several hundred were sent to Libya for military training. Few of these men were rooted in the traditional world of the Islamic boarding schools, or *dayah*, but were instead adventurous youths seeking greater personal prosperity abroad. At the same time, GAM's chief leaders were living in exile in the liberal environs of Europe, or in Singapore and Malaysia. Though many GAM leaders and recruits were unquestionably devout, their experiences of exile gave them a worldly and cosmopolitan outlook.

The fruits of these processes were visible after Suharto fell in 1998. Many Acehnese intellectuals, journalists and others criticised the *ulama* in an unprecedentedly direct manner, accusing them of being silent or even collaborating with the authorities when the army had killed Acehnese civilians during its attempts to repress the rebellion. Among the most vociferous critics were GAM leaders, some of whom publicly condemned the *ulama* for their 'collaboration' with the government, and privately threatened them. The gap between rebel and religious leaders had widened.

The third and most important difference between GAM and the older *Darul Islam* was ideological. An examination of the writings of Hasan Tiro makes it clear that, despite elements of continuity, GAM was a fundamentally new phenomenon. Hasan's decisive innovation was to replace Islam with nationalism as the ideological basis and justification for the Acehnese struggle. His essential claim was that a contemporary independent Aceh (represented by GAM) was a 'successor state' to the old sultanate of Aceh. He did not emphasise the Islamic nature of that earlier state, but rather its sovereign status. In the words of the 1976 'redeclaration' of independence: 'Our fatherland, Aceh, Sumatra had always been a free and independent Sovereign State since the world begun (*sic*)' (Tiro 1981: 24). In Hasan's view (which involved an especially ambitious rewriting of history), Aceh was never legally incorporated into the Netherlands East Indies or the Republic of Indonesia, but was instead illegally annexed by the former and then handed over to the latter (see Aspinall 2002 and 2003 for elaboration). This line of argument became central to GAM thinking. In all of Hasan's prolific writings from the 1960s, as well as other GAM propaganda material, the nationalist emphasis on the glories of Acehnese history and the legality of its claim for sovereignty always far overshadows the emphasis on Islam.

GAM's views on the place of Islam in its struggle were brought into sharp relief after Suharto fell, when the government began to implement aspects of *shari'a* in Aceh (see below). GAM fiercely rejected and condemned this move, while remaining ambiguous on the precise place Islam would occupy in the legal and political system of an independent Aceh. Generally, GAM spokespeople did not explicitly reject implementation of *shari'a* as such, a position which would have attracted opprobrium in such a devout population, but

rather the form in which it was being presented. They said that whether or how *shari'a* would be integrated into the legal system of a future Acehese state was a matter best left until after independence. Some of the organisation's leaders went further and suggested that Islam needed no formalisation in the state or laws, and that the country would have a modern legal system, not one based on *shari'a*. As one GAM spokesperson put it:

... religion for the Acehese lives inside one's self, as well as in the social system. We Acehese do not need Islamic *shari'a* [in legal form], it is a value, it is the religion which we follow, without [it being formalised in] law, these are still the values which we follow (interview with Teuku Kamaruzzaman, 9 June 2002).

GAM spokespeople publicly described implementation of *shari'a* as a 'trick' designed to deceive the *ulama* and the rest of the population (e.g. *Serambi Indonesia*, 14 December 2000). Desire for *shari'a*, they said, did not lie at the root of the Acehese revolt. Nor could it be a solution because, as one GAM spokesperson put it, 'Islamic *shari'a* is already deeply rooted [lit: like blood and flesh] in the Acehese nation. We have a total (*kaffah*) Islamic *shari'a*, while what the outsiders offer is only its skin' (*Serambi Indonesia*, 14 February 2002). While continuing the long-standing identification of Aceh with Islam, such formulations shifted Islam sideways, as it were. In the 1950s, Islam and *shari'a* were the centrepiece of the *Darul Islam* struggle. For GAM leaders, by contrast, Islam was a component of Acehese tradition, an aspect of Acehese national identity. The nation, not religion, was central.

The shift from religious to secular arguments was not merely tactical. It was a necessary correlate of the movement's adoption of independence as its chief goal. Islamic references could, and did, still infuse the discourse of the movement. They could even reinforce arguments in favour of independence. But they could not be the foundation of a case for independence in majority-Muslim Indonesia.

A new Islamic policy

If, by the late 1990s, GAM had moved far from its Islamic moorings, the posture of the Indonesian government was also transformed. It became aware of the potential of appealing to Islam, and its emphasis on solidarity, community and brotherhood, for reinforcing Aceh's ties with the rest of Indonesia.

A chief element of the government's new Islamic policy was the decision to allow the provincial government to enforce aspects of *shari'a*. In late 1999, a law on 'Aceh's Specialness' was passed, followed in 2001 by a law on 'Special Autonomy'. The first law was a brief document, one article of which allowed for 'implementation of Islamic *Shari'a* for its adherents in social life'. The second law was more detailed and established a *Shari'a* Court which would have jurisdiction over Muslims in the province. Provincial regulations quickly followed, mostly attempting to regulate the personal moral and religious

behaviour of Muslims. Regulation Number 5 of 2000, for example, set down basic guidelines for implementation of Islamic prescriptions in social relations, worship, dress and the like. Much of it consisted of general exhortations. The first such (article 4(1)) conveys the flavour: 'Each adherent of the Islamic religion is obliged to obey, practice/carry out Islamic *shari'a* in a total manner in their daily life, in an orderly and perfect manner.' A series of public declarations and ceremonies announced, always with great fanfare, the introduction of *shari'a*. *Shari'a* police were recruited and by 2004 there were public canings for individuals caught gambling, drinking alcohol or engaging in other illicit behaviour.

The obvious irony was that the government responded to the crisis of the 1990s with a package (autonomy plus *shari'a*) which precisely fulfilled the demands made by *Darul Islam* in the 1950s, without taking account of the subsequent ideological shifts. An element of conscious political calculation was involved, with an explicit aim being to isolate GAM. As the head of President Habibie's Advisory Team on Aceh, Usman Hasan, put it in July 1999, a declaration that *shari'a* would be implemented would represent a 'breakthrough' in the 'handling' of the Aceh conflict:

Because with such a statement, it would soon be sorted out whether the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was Islamic or not. If it was proved not to be Islamic, the people would not support it. I am convinced that if GAM is indeed an Islamic movement, it will not use violence and cause chaos everywhere (*Kompas*, 25 July 1999).

In particular, implementation of *shari'a* appealed to many of Aceh's *ulama*. Leading figures from their ranks were incorporated into a new consultative council and played a leading role in drafting *shari'a* regulations.

In the post-Suharto period, Indonesian military and police officers also tried to Islamise the image of the security forces in Aceh. Much of this attempt involved little more than window-dressing: Arabic prayers painted on vehicles, soldiers ostentatiously praying in public, troops repairing village prayer-halls, and the like. A distinctive feature of the new approach, however, involved security officials condemning GAM as an anti-Islamic force. Military officers publicly berated GAM because, for example, it 'embraces secularism [and] cares nothing for religion' (*Waspada*, 16 January 2002) or because 'GAM basically never included Islam as the foundation for its struggle' (*Serambi Indonesia*, 1 May 2002).

The most effective military spokesperson in this regard was Syarifudin Tippe. From South Sulawesi (another region with a reputation for Islamic piety), he served two terms in Aceh as a senior officer in the military's territorial command structure in the late 1990s and early 2000s. While there, he became well known for delivering public sermons, where he would quote from the *Qur'an*, draw on reports of the Prophet's example and words (*hadith*), and use classical Islamic history to enjoin against rebellion. He did so partly by evoking the ideals of Islamic brotherhood in a way which echoed the same emphasis in the old *Darul Islam*. In one typical speech, he pointed to

the role of infidel Western powers in 'splitting and dividing Islamic unity', thus producing a proliferation of nation-states in the Arab world (Tippe 2001: 238). The implication for contemporary Aceh was clear: separatism was the latest attempt to destroy 'Islamic brotherhood amongst the Islamic *ummah*':

In that context, we see that apparently there is a great potential for these orientalists and secularists to set their sights on Aceh, as the biggest Islamic base area and enclave in Indonesia . . . Attempts to play the majority Muslim population off against the TNI [Indonesian Military], who are also Muslims, and to make them confront one another, are one indication of this. Unfortunately, the Islamic *ummah* itself has not responded wisely to the civil-military conflict fanned by those who come dressed in 'humanitarian shirts'. On the contrary, what has happened has been excessive and euphoric belief [among the Acehnese] in the Western world, especially those states or parties who are prepared to inject large sums of funding (Tippe 2001: 240–1).

Tippe's target here was Acehnese human rights organisations which criticised the military. The important point, however, is the change of dynamics. In the 1950s, Aceh's rebels had spoken in terms of *ukhuwah Islamiyah*, Islamic brotherhood. Fifty years later, government officials used similar language to defend the unitary state.

The government's new approach was obviously partly a response to GAM's strength and the threat of secession. But the policy shift also reflected a gradual but important change in the place of Islam in Indonesian national politics. When in 1984 Hasan Tiro depicted Aceh's struggle as part of a centuries' old conflict between Islam and unbelief, it was still relatively easy for Acehnese nationalists to find common cause with other Indonesian Islamists. The early 1980s was a time when Suharto's regime engaged in what its Islamist critics labeled 'Islam-phobia'. In his 1984 speech, Hasan Tiro (1984: 9) excoriated the regime as being run by '... a Roman Catholic butcher' (the army commander L. B. Moerdani) who was in charge of a 'Javanese/Indonesian army with half-a-million non-descript mercenary soldiers to suppress Islam!' Such rhetoric was similar to that found elsewhere on the radical fringes of Indonesian Islamism, where stories of Christian plots to destroy Islam were commonplace. Repression of Islamists during the high Suharto period blurred the boundary between GAM and other Indonesian Islamist dissenters.

The situation changed radically from the late 1980s. As has been observed in many studies, during the late Suharto era the government initiated a partial reconciliation with political Islam (Hefner 2000). Previous decades of Islamisation of society began to produce partial Islamisation of government. This process accelerated after the fall of Suharto. Some modernist Islamic politicians, activists, intellectuals and military officers who had earlier tried to reconcile state and Islam now moved into senior positions in government. It was those people who designed the new Islamic policy for Aceh. Democratisation reinforced the trend. After elections in 1999 there were Islamic parties in the national legislature who viewed unrest in Aceh as the result of past marginalisation of Islam, and who were ready to promote *shari'a* as the solution.

Islam as arena of nationalist contestation

By highlighting these shifts in the politics of Islam in Aceh, it is not intended here to suggest that 'Islam' had somehow become the monopoly of the government and others who favoured Aceh's integration with Indonesia. This was not the case. On the contrary, Islamic language, references and symbols still permeated the discourse of independence supporters. Particularly prominent was the call for justice. Members of various pro-independence youth groups which emerged after 1999 frequently said Islam provided them with 'spirit' and basic moral values that motivated their opposition to tyrannical rule. As Muhammad Nazar, the Chairperson of SIRA (Aceh Referendum Information Centre), a prominent new anti-government group, explained in an essay calling for an independence referendum:

Almighty God stated 'Indeed, Allah hates the tyrannical', and, elsewhere, 'Thus do not allow tyranny (colonialism) to run rampant and torture humankind on earth' (the *Qur'an*). It is clear, how Islam truly and greatly frees the *ummah* and humankind to struggle against tyranny, including tyranny perpetrated by the rulers and the state (Nazar 2000).⁴

This quotation is from an article in which Nazar directly responds to Syarifudin Tippe's attempt (quoted above) to use Islamic arguments to condemn separatism. Clearly, Islamic appeals were the monopoly of neither side in the struggle for Aceh. Instead, Islam was a field of contestation between rival Indonesian and Acehnese nationalisms.

But opposing tyranny (*kezaliman*) and arguing for separate nationhood are not the same thing. *Darul Islam* leaders also condemned tyranny when they argued for Aceh being part of a wider *Indonesian* Islamic state. General injunctions against injustice may reinforce a claim for separate nationhood, but it is another matter to make them a basic justification for secession in what is already a majority-Islamic country. At least, no Acehnese group successfully did this. As an illustration, it is worth reading more of Muhammad Nazar's response to Syarifuddin Tippe, where Nazar explains why Islam does not mandate Aceh's integration into Indonesia:

... several verses from the *Qur'an* and reports regarding the Prophet (*hadith*) have defined for the Islamic and human *ummah*, both explicitly and implicitly, the true nature of the question of integration. [This is] that 'Indeed, the Muslim *ummah* are like a single body, if one of its parts is in pain, then all feel pain' (*Hadith*). This is the real Islamic concept about integration. There is not a single verse or *hadith* which states, either explicitly or implicitly, that integration in Islam is territorial. In other words, there is no verse of the *Qur'an* or a *hadith* of the Prophet which declares, let alone enforces, the union of states within territorial boundaries: that Mecca must unite with Medina, Iraq must unite with Saudi Arabia, and so on. There is absolutely none of that. Islam only emphasises, and provides the concept, that the entire Islamic *ummah*, no matter where they are in the world, must be brothers. Islam binds them together strongly, so that feelings of pain, suffering and oppression are felt by all and responded to by all ... There is no prohibition if humans so desire ... to change their political status and their state.

Indeed, argues Nazar, Islam is open to, even celebratory of national diversity:

Islam deliberately does not state that humans are created in one tribe or in the same nation, or with the same skin colour. Rather, Islam reveals a diversity in the character of those creatures called human beings who must implement integration through universal global human solidarity. Here also, Islam does not insist upon territorial political integration. On the contrary, there is no prohibition on the great number of nations, as revealed by Almighty God: 'Indeed I have created you in tribes and nations so that you may know one another.'

Nazar's views directly refute Syarifuddin Tippe's by stressing that the brotherhood enjoined by the *Qur'an* is not concerned with the territorial nation-state. But he does not portray Islam as providing any positive injunction regarding secession. Nazar's argument is instead essentially negative: Islam does not prohibit secession and it allows diversity. But it prescribes neither. In short, he argues that Islam is indifferent to nationalism. This contrasts with Syarifuddin Tippe, who attempts to bind Islam's enjoyment of unity and solidarity directly to the cause of Indonesian national cohesion.

Conclusion

The last five decades have seen gradual but dramatic change in the politics of Islam and rebellion in Aceh. A rebel movement, the *Darul Islam*, which aimed to enforce *shari'a* and which viewed itself as part of an Indonesian Islamic state, evolved into a movement which relied primarily on secular-nationalist arguments and which had a position of studied ambiguity on *shari'a*.

This article suggests that three factors, above all, account for the dramatic change. The first was global politics. The Cold War had a polarising effect on ethnic and separatist conflicts in the developing world, with many ethnic movements making not always convincing attempts to depict themselves as either anti-imperialist or anti-communist freedom fighters. The new global conflict between the United States and its allies, and Islamism (evident since the Iranian revolution, but increasingly so in recent times), has had a similar effect on how armed movements in the Islamic world portray themselves. In the heady years after the Iranian revolution, Acehnese nationalists flirted with throwing in their lot with the global Islamic revolution. They soon abandoned this approach and began to expunge traces of GAM's Islamist past in their dealings with the outside world.

The second factor was a shift in Indonesian politics. During the first four decades of Indonesian independence, a political fissure divided secular-oriented leaders of the national state from a marginalised Muslim leadership that yearned to see Islam play a greater formal role in politics and society. Acehnese embitterment resonated with this nationwide disillusionment. In the final decade of Suharto's rule, however, and especially after his resignation in 1998, long-standing processes of societal Islamisation began to transform

national politics. The divide between the ruling elite and political Islam eroded. Acehese secessionists had less common ground with Islamists elsewhere in Indonesia. National leaders, in turn, began to look more favourably on using Islamic symbols and policies to undermine secessionism in Aceh.

The third and most important factor was the logic of national identity construction itself. The formation of GAM in 1976 marked a change in the ideological basis and justification for revolt. With the adoption of national independence as the chief goal, insurgency was justified fundamentally by a claim of distinct Acehese national identity and history. Islam could hardly by itself justify secession because, unlike places such as Kashmir, the Southern Philippines or Southern Thailand, it was not a marker of difference from the rest of the nation-state, but rather a point of commonality. In the Acehese nationalist vision, Islam was thus gradually but inexorably relegated to being a source of moral inspiration and merely one aspect, however important, of Acehese national identity. This process happened almost in spite of the Acehese nationalist leaders themselves, most of whom were personally very religious.

In Aceh, this shift was partly the product of the history of narrowing Islamic options for local leaders. But the Aceh experience has wider relevance. Robinson (1979) suggests that certain aspects of Islamic ideology – for example, the emphasis on brotherhood, unity and solidarity – predispose Muslim minorities toward separatism. However, precisely the same ideas can readily be mobilised *against* separatist ideas in disgruntled Muslim regions in majority-Muslim states. Thus we see that during the *Darul Islam* revolt, secessionist nationalism did not emerge, although many of its preconditions did. Even during the revolt, Islamic networks continued to bind disillusioned Acehese leaders to the rest of Indonesia, if only to Indonesia's Islamist opposition. They expressed their continued attachment to Indonesian unity as a commitment to Islamic brotherhood. In this sense, Islam delayed the development of separatist nationalism, even though it also provided ideological justification for revolt. The eventual spread of the secessionist idea was accompanied by a shift away from explicitly Islamic ideology.

The broader significance is clear. During recent decades most separatist movements where Muslim ethnic minorities attempt to break away from majority non-Muslim states have found an easy fit with, and have been greatly influenced by, the global spread of militant Islamism. Many such movements have become more overtly Islamic, even Islamist, in orientation (Sikand 2001 provides an excellent example in Kashmir). By contrast, in places like Aceh where majority-Muslim ethnic minorities seek to secede from countries where most of the population is also Muslim, it is difficult to find secessionist movements which prominently feature Islamic goals. Of course, separatist leaders sometimes claim that their community practices a particularly local form of Islam or (as occurred in Aceh) are more devout than the rest of the country, and that this helps to justify separation. Such claims, however, do not resonate well with Islam's universal message and they tend not to

dominate secessionist politics. Instead, in places like Western Sahara and Kurdistan, where Islam does not readily mark the boundary between secessionists and the non-secessionist majority, avowedly secular organisations are dominant.

Notes

1 The author thanks Michael Laffan, David Brown, Greg Fealy, participants in the East West Center's 'Dynamics and Management of Internal Conflicts in Asia' project, and three anonymous reviewers for their comments, and the Australian Research Council for funding support.

2 Pancasila, the 'five principles', was devised by Sukarno in 1945 as a basis for Indonesian national unity. Most of the principles (democracy, humanitarianism, social justice and nationalism) were uncontroversial. The first principle, 'Belief in One God', was intended as a sop to Islamic forces while refusing to concede to their demand for an Islamic state.

3 Thanks to Ephraim Nimni for first suggesting consideration of Aceh as a case of delayed nationalism.

4 The explanations in parentheses are in the original, and the translations of the *Qur'anic* phrases are from Nazar's own Indonesian language renderings of them. Particularly noteworthy is Nazar's insertion of the word *penjajahan* (colonialism) as clarification into the text after *kezaliman* (tyranny).

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