FIVE YEARS AFTER the devastating Indian Ocean tsunami of Dec. 26, 2004, little trace of the disaster remains. The Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Agency for Aceh and Nias (BRR) wound up operations in May, and policy makers have shifted attention to the Indonesian province’s longer-term development challenges.

Aceh’s future progress now depends on recovery from a different type of crisis—the three-decades-long civil war between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the government of Indonesia that was still raging when the tsunami struck. By shifting the order of needs and placing the province under the international spotlight, the tsunami had a catalytic effect on peace negotiations. During the first few months of tsunami recovery work, a political solution to the conflict began to look possible. At talks brokered by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, GAM indicated willingness, for the first time, to abandon separatist demands in return for greater autonomy and a role in governing the province.

But peace talks nearly collapsed over how the former rebels would be given a role in governing the province. Government negotiators offered to appoint rebels to senior local government posts and suggested that former rebels run as national party candidates in local elections. But GAM leaders demanded the right to form their own local political party in Aceh. This was politically very tricky for a country with a historical aversion to local political parties; antipathy harks back to the 1950s when regional parties were blamed for the collapse of parliamentary democracy and the rise of strongman authoritarianism. Since Indonesia’s return to democracy in 1999, only avowed national parties have been allowed to contest elections. Political parties must maintain branches in 60% of the country’s provinces and in 50% of districts and municipalities within those provinces. Local parties are prohibited from contesting even local elections.

Bullets to Ballots: Aceh in 2009

by Ben Hillman

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Not surprisingly, when details of GAM's demands became public, prominent politicians lined up to oppose any peace deal that would give the rebels their own party. Former President Megawati Sukarnoputri argued that local parties would become vehicles for separatism. Others warned that local parties in parliament could lead to a referendum for independence like in East Timor. A poll taken in July 2005 suggested that a majority of the public were also against local parties for Aceh.

In response, advocates of the local political party option argued that they were the only practical means of granting political rights to the former rebels, since GAM had no linkages to national parties. Eventually, Indonesia's Vice President Jusuf Kalla and President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono recognized an historic opportunity to end the conflict and finally agreed to let GAM have their party.

The 2006 and 2009 Elections

THE PEACE AGREEMENT, signed in Helsinki on Aug. 15, 2005, promised that the Indonesian government would establish “political and legal conditions” for local political parties within a year. So that GAM could participate in the imminent elections for local heads of government, the Helsinki Memorandum (MOU) also enabled the Aceh people to nominate “independent” candidates. While this right has now been extended to all Indonesians, at the time only candidates nominated by national political parties were eligible to stand for election.

Interestingly, because GAM was not fielding candidates under a united party flag, a number of rivals emerged to contest the governorship. When a factional split developed between the former rebel's exiled leaders and fighters on the ground, some wondered whether GAM would ever unite as a single party. But the landslide victory of former rebel Irwandi Yusuf on Dec. 9, 2006, became a rallying point for the movement.

While the election results were accepted as legitimate by all parties, the prospect of the former rebels continuing to amass political and economic power remained abhorrent to many of GAM's former enemies, including elements within the security forces and pro-Jakarta militias. Tensions boiled over when the “GAM Party” was launched in 2007 because the party had provocatively retained the name and symbols of the former separatist movement. Despite GAM's rebuttal that the acronym no longer meant “Free Aceh Movement,” heat from Jakarta and a quiet word from international diplomats monitoring the peace convinced party leaders to change the party's name to the “Aceh Party.”

The 2009 parliamentary elections would be the first major test for the new party and for its transition from fighting force to political force. The Aceh Party would contest 69 seats in the provincial legislature and up to 645 seats across the province's 23 districts and municipalities. Confident in its popular appeal, the party predicted it would win 80% of the vote.

In the months leading up to the elections, GAM's former enemies made their displeasure at the Aceh Party's rise increasingly felt. A series of violent attacks targeted the Party, which reported that seven of its members and officials were murdered during this period and a number of its branch offices were wrecked by grenade blasts. Elements within the armed forces and anti-GAM militias were thought to have been behind the attacks. A handful of suspects remain in detention in Jakarta, Medan and Aceh.

As the elections drew closer, the Aceh Party got up to some mischief of its own. It mobilized its network of former combatants to dominate the political space at the grass roots, and in some places aggressive-
ly prevented other parties from campaigning on their turf. Their bullying extended to Aceh’s five other home-grown local parties, some of which they referred to as “traitors”—a term with troubling connotations.

Opponents accused the Aceh Party of political terrorism, and some claimed that they had received anonymous phone calls warning them not to attend the polling stations. SIRA, another local party and former GAM ally, accused Aceh Party members of stoning their supporters and kidnapping one of their election observers. On election day, extra troops were sent in to guard the polling stations, but many observers worried that this would only add fuel to the fire. Fortunately, such fears turned out to be misplaced. All parties respected the “no campaigning” period for three days before the election. Ultimately, large numbers of people turned out to vote, and the elections were considered by national and international observers to be largely free, fair and peaceful.

The Aftermath

AS WITH THE gubernatorial race in 2006, the results surprised many observers. Despite competition from 38 national parties and five other local parties, the Aceh Party won a landslide victory, picking up 33 out of 69 seats in the provincial legislature and the largest number of seats of any party in 14 out of 23 districts and municipalities. Even in Banda Aceh, the provincial capital, where voter preferences tend to be more diverse, the party came a close second. The election results testified to the wide appeal of GAM and widespread antipathy towards national political parties in Aceh. The only big winner among the national parties was the Democrat Party—the Aceh Party’s unofficial ally.

A survey of 1,400 voters conducted by researchers from the Australian National University and Syiah Kuala University in Aceh found the result to be an accurate reflection of voters’ preferences and demonstrated that pre-election intimidation had little impact on the end result. The research, presented for the first time this month at a policy forum in Jakarta, also investigated reasons for the strong victory. While some voters were afraid the conflict could start up again if the Aceh Party lost, the study revealed that most Aceh Party supporters thought the party deserved a chance to govern.

The election results confirm that the central government’s decision to allow local political parties in Aceh was the right one. It gave the people of Aceh a choice and it provided a legitimate vehicle for transforming the former rebels into politicians. The Indonesian government’s shrewd decision has helped to consolidate peace and democracy in Aceh and serves as a model of conflict management for the rest of the world.

Aceh’s stability and development now very much depends on the Aceh Party’s performance in the coming years and the central government’s attitude to Acehnese autonomy. Many institutional features of the autonomy arrangements have yet to be worked out. Center-local shares of oil and gas revenues were agreed in the MOU, but not the means by which these would be calculated. Aceh party leaders are now lobbying for specific regulations.

There are overlapping authorities on as many as 32 different key policy domains, and nearly 80% of the provincial budget still comes from Jakarta. The national government still controls land use, which prevents local government from allocating land to former fighters. Inaugurated in September, the Aceh Party’s new and inexperienced legislators are still figuring out how to confront these issues. One thing is clear, however—party members seem to agree that Aceh’s autonomy has yet to be fully realized.
Moving Forward

While Gam has now transformed itself into a viable electoral machine, it remains unclear how it will manage itself as a parliamentary party. Party leaders claim not to be interested in national politics, but achievement of the party’s policy goals all require changes to national laws. The Aceh Party will have to find ways to work with other parties in Aceh to negotiate their policy goals with Jakarta. Troublingly, some party members believe that the national Law on Governing Aceh should now be discarded in favor of local laws. Such comments risk playing into the hands of antagonists in Jakarta, who have long warned that powerful local parties will only demand more autonomy and ultimately a referendum on independence.

Architects of the peace agreement recognized the danger of local parties becoming isolated from national political life. To encourage local-national coalition building, the Law on Governing Aceh allowed members of local parties to join national parties. Unfortunately, the Law on Political Parties holds “dual membership” to be grounds for dismissal, which makes national party members reluctant to embrace local parties. Indeed, the Star Reform Party (PBR) and the National Awakening Party (PAN) have already sacked or recalled members from parliament after they joined local parties.

While the Aceh Party appeared to have forged an informal alliance with the national Democrat Party in the run-up to the April polls, it is uncertain whether such partnerships will survive outside of elections. The lack of a clear legal mechanism for coalition-building between political parties should be as much of a concern to Jakarta as it is for Aceh. If the Aceh Party is unable to make headway with some of its core policy goals, its position towards Jakarta could harden. The national government should ensure that communication channels remain open. Similarly, the Aceh Party should be careful not to get too carried away with its electoral mandate. Regardless of different views about the meaning of autonomy, full implementation of the Helsinki mou, including the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, will require the cooperation of national authorities.

Whether the Aceh Party’s electoral success in 2009 will translate into long-term political success depends on its performance during the next term until 2014. Despite an abundance of natural resources and billions of dollars invested in reconstruction, Aceh’s economy has grown slowly. Many former combatants are jobless and have received little of the reintegration funds from local government and international donors. Levels of violent crime remain among the highest in Indonesia. Recently, some of that violence has targeted foreigners. Corruption, extortion and uncompetitive business practices by former combatants remain major impediments to investment. The Aceh Party will also have its hands full dealing with religious affairs. The outgoing parliament left behind new Sharia laws, which introduce, among other things, stoning as punishment for adultery. Aceh Party leaders are not supporters of this kind of Sharia law, but they must tread carefully to avoid falling out with powerful local ulama. They have a tough job ahead of them. The ANU-Syiah Kuala study found that voter loyalty to the party was weak. A majority of the respondents said they would not vote for the party again if it did not meet their expectations.

So far, the decision to allow local parties to contest elections in Aceh must be judged a success. The 2009 parliamentary elections represent an important milestone for the peace process, but the process of post-conflict integration has only just begun.