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Power-sharing and political party engineering in conflict-prone societies: the Indonesian experiment in Aceh
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Establishing legitimate political leadership through non-violent means is an essential step in the rebuilding of post-conflict societies. For this reason the successful holding of democratic elections is often seen as the crowning achievement of the peace process. In recent years, however, it has become clear that elections do not always guarantee the peace, and may in fact, make societies more dangerous.1 This has prompted political scientists to look more closely at other dimensions of the transition from violent conflict to democratic politics, including the role of political parties. Political parties play an essential role in all democracies, but their importance is magnified in conflict-prone societies. While some scholars have argued that political parties may help to consolidate peace by forming coalitions between groups formerly in conflict, more recent research suggests that such parties may also entrench social cleavages, especially if party formation is based along former conflict fault lines. This article considers these arguments in the case of Aceh, Indonesia, where an historic peace agreement allowed former Acehnese rebels to form their own political party—one based along both ethnic and former conflict lines.
**Introduction**

Establishing legitimate political leadership through non-violent means is an essential step in the rebuilding of post-conflict societies. For this reason the successful holding of democratic elections is often seen as the crowning achievement of the peace process. In recent years, however, there is increasing evidence that elections do not always guarantee the peace, and may in fact, make societies more dangerous.\(^2\) This has prompted political scientists to consider other dimensions of the transition from violent conflict to democratic politics, including the role of political parties. Political parties play an essential role in all democracies, but their importance is magnified in conflict-prone societies. Political parties may help to consolidate peace by forming coalitions between groups formerly in conflict.\(^3\) But they may also entrench social cleavages, especially if party formation is based along former conflict fault lines.\(^4\) As Bogaards observes, there is a general view that ‘particularistic parties threaten social peace, national integrity and political stability’.\(^5\)

The Aceh case presents a rare opportunity to explore such arguments in a multi-ethnic, conflict-prone and newly democratising state (Indonesia). The Aceh case is especially interesting because Indonesia has elsewhere banned local political parties from contesting elections. While the tendency to restrict smaller parties is common throughout Asia,\(^6\) since its return to democracy in 1999 Indonesia has taken the additional step of banning political parties that are based on ethnic or regional affiliations. Indonesia’s Law on Political Parties (2009) effectively bans such parties by way of the stringent requirements it insists political groups meet before being permitted to register as a political party. The strict criteria for political party registration were set out in Indonesia’s earlier Law on Political Parties (2002). This law required political parties to establish executive boards and party offices in at least 50 per cent of Indonesia’s 30 provinces and in at least 50 per cent of districts (kabupaten) and municipalities (kota) within those provinces in order to qualify to register for elections. Further, the law required political parties to maintain subdistrict branches in at least 25 per cent of a district or municipality’s subdistricts (kecamatan). In order to register for elections in Indonesia political parties would have to maintain thousands of branch offices across the country’s vast archipelago.

Underlining national political elites’ disdain for regional parties was a draft revision of the Law on Political Parties tabled in Indonesia’s House of Representatives in 2007. The draft law proposed to further tighten restrictions on parties’ organisational bases by
increasing the representational requirement to 75 per cent of Indonesia’s provinces. Civil society organisations protested loudly during the draft bill’s deliberations, arguing that this would unfairly advantage incumbent parties and disadvantage smaller parties. In the final legislation—Law No 20/2008 on Political Parties—the bar was set at 60 per cent. While such forms of political engineering are common in new democracies—Turkey, Nigeria, Mexico and Thailand have all introduced laws to encourage parties to develop a national base, Indonesia’s political party laws are particularly restrictive in the world of democracies in that they apply to all elections in the country including local elections. Indonesia is currently the only democracy that prevents local political parties from contesting even local elections.7

Indonesia’s aversion to local political parties has its antecedents in the country’s first experiment with parliamentary democracy in the 1950s. In Indonesia today, the collapse of the democratic system in the first years of the Republic and the subsequent rise of military dictatorship is typically blamed on the centrifugal forces generated by regional interests and expressed through regional parties and political organisations.8 Because the first years of the post-authoritarian era were also accompanied by widespread conflict, including the breakaway of East Timor in 1999, Indonesia’s new leaders made sure that regional forces were denied access to political power. Set against this backdrop, the Government of Indonesia’s decision to allow historically restive Aceh to form local political parties was extraordinary. It was a critical decision, enabling the resolution of a three decade-long conflict over the status of Aceh. The following section provides some background to the conflict and explains how the political party issue emerged in the face of great domestic opposition to secure the historic 2005 Helsinki Peace Agreement.

Conflict and Acehnese exceptionalism

Aceh’s status within Indonesia was contested from the very beginning of Indonesia’s founding as a Republic in 1945. Prior to Aceh’s amalgamation with other former Dutch colonies to form the newly independent state, Aceh had enjoyed centuries of independence as a relatively wealthy sultanate that was strategically located on the trade routes between East Asia and the Middle East. The arrival of Islam and other cultures from the Middle East and South Asia helped to shape a distinct Acehnese identity. Indeed, through trade and religious ties until the end of the nineteenth century Acehnese identified more readily with
Ottoman Turkey than with most other parts of present-day Indonesia. In fact, it was only after Dutch forces attempted to colonise Aceh in 1873 that Acehnese elites began to seek stronger ties with other parts of Dutch East Indies. When Java-based nationalists declared independence from the Dutch in 1945, Aceh opted to join the new Indonesia.

Aceh's political elites had assumed they would maintain a high degree of autonomy in the new Republic, but Indonesia's Java-based leadership rejected their request for special autonomy status (daerah istimewa), instead making Aceh part of the larger Province of North Sumatra. Resentful of this, and maintaining a strong sense of independence and cultural distinctiveness, Aceh's political and religious elites joined forces with the Darul Islam movement—a movement dedicated to establishing an Islamic state, which emerged in Java in the early 1950s, in the hope of securing their own independence. The rebellion in Aceh lasted until 1962 when Jakarta finally agreed to grant Aceh special autonomy status.

This did not improve relations between Jakarta and local elites in Aceh. The promised special autonomy status was not immediately implemented in spite of the agreement and was ultimately revoked in 1968 when General Suharto seized political power from Indonesia's founding President. Suharto's rigid centralism and authoritarianism led to the continued incubation of Acehnese hostility and mistrust toward Jakarta. The discovery in the late 1960s of significant oil and gas deposits off the Acehnese coast added fresh stimulus to local grievances. Jakarta contracted exploration and drilling to American oil companies and appropriated the lion's share of revenue. This triggered a new armed rebellion in 1976, led by Hasan di Tiro, a former ambassador of the Darul Islam movement, and one whose own desire to enter the oil business had been crushed by Jakarta-based interests. Hasan's small band of rebels was quickly dispatched by the Indonesian armed forces in 1977, but Hasan di Tiro and other rebel leaders continued their campaign for independence from exile. They began to train a new group of Acehnese fighters in Libya in preparation for a second phase of fighting in 1989.

To counter this threat Indonesia declared Aceh a 'special military zone' (Daerah Operasi Militer, DOM). Using brutal tactics, Indonesia's armed forces kept the still small band of rebels at bay for much of the next decade. The collapse in 1998 of Suharto's authoritarian regime following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis emboldened the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM), as the group had by then become known. GAM took advantage of the political vacuum to recruit new members (most were local farmers, but there were many deserters from the police and army) and to expand its area of operations.
in the province. GAM was also able to use people’s concerns about the collapse of central
government to win broader popular support for a new Acehnese authority. The group
expanded its system of taxation that funded weapons procurement and organisational
strengthening. By the time the central government regained its footing, following a
transition to democratic government in 1999, GAM had become a force to be reckoned
with. GAM quickly became a de facto government in many parts of Aceh, collecting taxes
and providing services. In 2003 a newly assertive central government under the leadership
of nationalist President Megawati Sukarnoputri revived counter-insurgency operations in
Aceh, sending an additional 42,000 police and military personnel to the province in an
attempt to wipe out GAM. Like the DOM period in the previous decade, this period was
characterised by escalating violence and rampant human rights violations. While the
Indonesian armed forces demonstrated military superiority, the army’s brutality only
increased popular support for GAM.

While the fighting continued, Indonesia’s democratic government continued to
negotiate with GAM’s exiled leadership. Negotiations begun in 2002–2003, resumed in
late 2004 and were given a major boost when the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 26 December
2004 struck the province, claiming an estimated 168,000 Acehnese lives and displacing
many tens of thousands of people. The devastation of the tsunami altered the hierarchy of
needs in Aceh and with it the political situation. The dispute over Aceh’s political status
became subsumed by the urgent need for recovery and rehabilitation from natural disaster.
With priorities refocused, large-scale international intervention provided additional
pressure for hostilities to be brought to an end. Indeed, both sides of the conflict appeared
eager to demonstrate their contributions to the post-tsunami recovery effort.

In the months following the tsunami, a new round of negotiations brokered by former
Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari in 2005 made a breakthrough. For the first time GAM
indicated it was willing to relinquish its armed struggle for independence in return for
greater autonomy for Aceh and the right to compete for political office. Negotiations now
hinged on the means by which GAM’s participation in the province’s politics would be
realised. A sticking point was GAM’s demand that anyone in Aceh be allowed to form a
political party and contest elections. This demand was initially rejected by central
government negotiators, but GAM insisted that this right was sine qua non for a peace deal.

When the details of the negotiations were made public Jakarta’s nationalist politicians
stoked a public outcry. Former Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri argued that a
local party for GAM would allow them to pursue secession by political means. Megawati
publicly criticised current Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhyono and then Vice President Yusuf Kalla for even considering a local political party option in negotiations with GAM. Another former president Abdurrahman Wahid went so far as to suggest that local political parties were anti-democratic. Golkar Party Chair and Speaker of the Indonesian House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR) Agung Laksono insisted that political parties were, by definition, ‘national’. Former Speaker of the House Akbar Tanjung warned that local parties in Aceh would set a dangerous precedent for other areas, especially Papua. Religious leaders also weighed into the debate. Chairman of Indonesia’s largest Muslim organisation Nahdlatul Ulama Hasyim Muzadi, Jakarta Bishop Julius Kardinal Darmaatmaja and Andreas Yewangoe from the Indonesian Church Union issued a joint statement condemning the idea of local political parties for Aceh, arguing that local political parties would ultimately lead to a referendum on independence for Aceh.\footnote{Ben Hillman}

The Indonesian public also appeared to be firmly against allowing GAM to form its own political party. According to a nation-wide survey conducted in July 2005, 75.8 per cent of Indonesians were opposed to local political parties in general.\footnote{A larger number—76.2 per cent—were specifically opposed to giving GAM the right to form its own local political party.} Survey results reflected public fears that local political parties would lead to national disintegration. According to Indonesian analysts, public opposition to local parties for Aceh also reflected public concern that the government had been too generous in its negotiations with GAM. Indeed, international exposure following the tsunami appeared to have strengthened GAM’s bargaining position vis-à-vis the central government. Before the tsunami, the Indonesian military’s ruthless counter-insurgency had greatly weakened GAM as a fighting force. Some even believed that GAM was on the brink of military defeat. Many among the Indonesian public also remained suspicious of GAM’s claim that it would give up its struggle for independence if allowed to form a political party.

Under such strong public pressure central government negotiators appeared to be willing to offer GAM almost anything else if they would back down on demands for a local political party. They offered to directly appoint former rebels to positions of political authority (Indonesia only began to introduce direct elections for local government executives from 2005). When GAM negotiators argued that the democratisation of Aceh was more important, the central government negotiators promised to ensure that national parties would nominate former rebels as candidates. But GAM argued that it could not be expected to co-operate with national parties, whose policies the movement had long
opposed. GAM’s leaders argued that a local party was the only means by which GAM’s political rights could be secured in a post-conflict Aceh.

The public debates in Indonesia over the local party issue closely mirrored scholarly debates about the role of political parties in divided societies. On the one hand, nationalists argued that the emergence of regional, ethnic-based parties in Aceh would sow the seeds of Indonesia’s disintegration. On the other hand, supporters of the idea argued that a political party was the only means by which GAM could be given political access and thereby be discouraged from using violence to pursue its interests. The challenge for Indonesia’s President and Vice President, who exercised ultimate leadership over the negotiations with GAM, was to strike a balance between the risks of politicising ethnicity/regional identities and the need to facilitate GAM’s orderly entry into Indonesia’s multi-party democracy. With negotiations on the brink of collapse, they decided that a potentially unpopular compromise was needed to seal an historic peace deal. With direct intervention from the President and Vice President, Government of Indonesia negotiators finally agreed to GAM’s demands that local political parties be allowed in Aceh, but on the condition that such parties would be restricted to provincial, district and municipality elections. Local parties would not be able to contest seats at the national level. This opened space for political representation in Aceh, while simultaneously reducing the possibility that regionalist or ethnic agendas would enter national politics. It was nevertheless a major gamble by Indonesia’s leaders. They were embarking upon an ethno-federal experiment in a country with a deep-seated aversion to federalism and widespread fear of ethnic parties. The consequences of their decision would only be known several years later in the parliamentary elections of April 2009.

**Aceh’s new local political parties and the 2009 legislative elections**

Passed by Indonesia’s House of Representatives in July 2006, the Law on Governing Aceh (LOGA) paved the way for the emergence of political parties in Aceh, but restricted them to local (provincial and district/municipality) legislative elections. No party from Aceh would be able to contest seats in the national House of Representatives. National politicians attempted to use the law to engineer future local political parties in Aceh by providing great detail in the LOGA on party formation and eligibility to contest elections.
The LOGA borrowed restrictions from the Law on Political Parties, requiring local parties to have established management committees in at least 50 per cent of Aceh’s (21) districts and municipalities and in at least 25 per cent of subdistricts within those districts and municipalities. When it came to contesting elections, however, the LOGA stipulated even tougher criteria. Under Section 89(1) to register for elections a local political party would need to:

(a) have been ratified as a legal entity;
(b) have established executive committees at least in two thirds of Aceh’s districts and municipalities;
(c) have complete organisational structure in at least two thirds of the subdistricts in each district and municipality in item (b);
(d) have considered how to achieve female representation of at least 30 per cent;
(e) have members numbering at least 1/1000 of the population in each subdistrict as per item (c) and membership numbers must be proven with membership cards.
(f) have permanent offices in each district and subdistrict as per items (b) and (c); and
(g) have proposed the party’s names and symbol to the Aceh Independent Electoral Commission.

The strict rules for party electoral eligibility—even stricter than the national Law on Political Parties, which required representation in 60 per cent of provinces—were repeated in the provincial law (Qanun) governing the formation of local parties. This is not surprising given that in 2008 Aceh’s provincial legislature was dominated by national political parties. The law appears to have been designed to restrict participation by local political parties in forthcoming elections, and in this it was successful. Of the 12 groups meeting requirements to register as political parties with the Department of Law and Human Rights, the Aceh Independent Elections Commission (KIP) subsequently determined that only six parties met eligibility criteria to participate in the 2009 general elections.19

Interestingly, however, GAM did not oppose the restrictive provisions on party formation. This is because former rebel leaders knew they would easily meet the requirements and that, by knocking out other potential local competitors, the restrictions would also be to their benefit. Although the LOGA had given all Acehnese the right to form political parties (i.e. not just GAM), the former rebels considered that, because they had
earned this right through their struggle, they were the only legitimate group in Aceh to form a political party.\textsuperscript{20} In fact, GAM leaders expressed open hostility toward other local parties in Aceh, arguing that they were little different from national parties.\textsuperscript{21} A political campaign poster produced by GAM during the 2009 election campaign to ‘explain’ the party system in Aceh to voters categorised other local parties with national parties and presented the Aceh Party as the only ‘true’ local party.

Despite the strict regulations on party formation and GAM’s best efforts to discourage other political groups from forming their own parties, five other local parties managed to meet the administrative criteria required to register for the 2009 elections. These political parties represented diverse interest groups in Aceh, including religious communities and the urban middle classes, not all of whom automatically identified with GAM’s struggle. In fact, it appeared that one of the main driving forces for other local parties, apart from the political aspirations of their founders, was a concern among some groups, especially some religious leaders, that Aceh should not become dominated by the secular-minded former rebels.\textsuperscript{22} The following is a brief overview of the local political parties that registered for the 2009 provincial and district/municipality legislative elections.

(1) The Aceh Party (\textit{Partai Aceh}, PA): party representing the former Free Aceh Movement, founded by the rebels’ exiled leaders and some senior ex-combatants.

(2) Aceh Sovereignty Party (\textit{Partai Daulat Aceh}, PDA): founded by Muslim clerics (ulema) and graduates of local Islamic boarding schools (santri) to promote the implementation of Shariah law in Aceh.


(4) The Independent Voice of the Acehnese People’s Party (\textit{Suara Independen Rakyat Aceh}, SIRA): founded by former pro-referendum activists under the leadership of Aceh Vice Governor Muhamad Nazar.


Because it was the political group representing the former rebels, the Aceh Party naturally attracted the most attention. GAM leaders first launched the party on 7 July 2007
as the GAM Party, using a flag and symbol closely resembling the emblems of the former separatist movement. This caused outrage in Jakarta, with nationalist politicians accusing the former rebels of offending the principles of the peace agreement. While GAM Party leaders argued that the ‘M’ in the GAM Party name referred to *mandiri* (autonomy) and not *merdeka* (independence) as in the separatist movement’s acronym, Party leaders eventually relented, changing the party’s name to simply the ‘Aceh Party’ (*Partai Aceh*). This eased tensions, but the process contributed to lingering suspicions about whether the Party’s leadership was genuinely committed to the unitary state of Indonesia. Some commentators wondered openly whether the Party’s stated intent to secure an absolute majority in the provincial parliament meant that they secretly planned to introduce a referendum for independence.

The April 2009 parliamentary elections would be an important test of the peace agreement and the decision to allow local political parties to participate. Unfortunately, in the lead up to the polls, there were troubling signs that the elections would not be peaceful. In 2008 there was a string of arson attacks against party offices in various parts of Aceh, including drive-by shootings and grenade attacks. Five people associated with the Aceh Party or the Aceh Transitional Authority (KPA)—the new civilian authority representing former GAM combatants—were murdered under mysterious circumstances. Tensions between Aceh Party supporters and elements of the security forces also continued to simmer. Within the military, many remained suspicious that GAM still harboured secessionist ambitions.

For its part, the Aceh Party campaigned aggressively. The Party harnessed its networks of former combatants, which were now organised into an informal but powerful body known as the Aceh Transitional Committee (*Komite Peralihan Aceh, KPA*). The KPA’s ostensible role was to facilitate the reintegration of ex-combatants and to ensure that they behaved in accordance with the peace agreement and the law. But the KPA had become much more than that. It had become a formidable organisation, especially at the local level where it controlled a vast network of businesses and wielded great influence over local politics. In many parts of Aceh it had become difficult to participate in politics without explicit or implicit support from the local KPA office. According to GAM’s post-Helsinki structure (the peace agreement did not disband GAM, only its military wing—the Aceh National Army (*Tentara Neugara Aceh, TNA*), the Aceh Party and KPA were separate entities, but in reality it was sometimes difficult to separate the two because the same GAM leaders led...
both organisations. GAM military commander and KPA chief, Muzakkir Manaf, for example, also served as Chair of the Aceh Party.

The Aceh Party used the strong organisation and discipline of the KPA to dominate the political space in much of Aceh, particularly in rural areas. The Aceh Party’s election campaign was based on a simple platform which included full implementation of the Helsinki MoU, by which it was meant that the Party would focus on optimising special autonomy powers for Aceh. But, perhaps unsurprisingly for ex-combatants unfamiliar with democracy, Aceh Party campaigners also employed subtle and overt forms of intimidation to mobilise votes. Party campaign posters, for example, insisted that an Aceh Party victory was essential for peace, suggesting that fighting might resume if the Aceh Party lost. Other party placards printed in the Acehnese language were even more menacing—‘live together or die together’, according to one sign that was intended to evoke the loyalty for which GAM fighters were once known.\(^{25}\) The Party also intimidated other parties, especially other local political parties, using the KPA to prevent them from campaigning in some places. In the media and academia, political commentators in Aceh complained that they received threatening phone calls if they reported anything remotely critical about the Aceh Party.\(^{26}\)

The Aceh Party also mobilised ethnic identity in its campaign, notably traditional dress, but such costumes were also worn by candidates from other local and national parties. Ethnicity was mobilised as a symbol of pride in Aceh’s distinctiveness, but not in opposition to other ethnic groups, such as the ethnic minorities who live in the province’s southern regions. Indeed, as Aspinall has argued for Indonesia as a whole, elections in Aceh have been associated with a ‘soft’ ethnic politics, ‘with few of the deep disputes about ethnohistory and cultural policies associated with more ethnicized policies.’\(^{27}\) The relatively low level of ethnic-based antagonism in Aceh stands the region in contrast to many other recent civil conflicts from Central Africa to the Balkans.

Despite intimidation and pockets of violence in the lead up to the polls, international support for Aceh’s new electoral authority and public enthusiasm for the historic vote ensured that the election proceeded without major incident. The Aceh Party won in a landslide victory, dominating the elections to a degree not seen by any political party in Indonesia since the country’s return to democracy in 1999. While falling short of its own inflated expectations, the Aceh Party won 46.91 per cent of the vote, which translated into 33 seats in the 69 seat legislature and more than a third of all seats up for grabs across 23 district and municipal assemblies.\(^{28}\) The Aceh Party secured absolute majorities in seven
district-level assemblies and became the largest party in another seven. The Aceh Party even performed well in areas that were not its traditional strongholds, including in ethnic minority areas, suggesting the preference of some minorities for the Aceh Party over national parties. At the national level, the Aceh Party’s informal ally the Democrat Party performed the best of all national parties winning seven out of 13 seats up for grabs in the province.

A surprise result of the election was the performance of Aceh’s five other local parties, which won only 6.62 per cent of the provincial vote between them. Only one of the other five parties—the Aceh Sovereignty Party—managed to secure a single seat in the provincial assembly. Because each of the five local parties failed to achieve the five per cent threshold, they would be prevented from contesting future elections using the same party name. Representatives of the losing parties cried foul, pointing to intimidation by the Aceh Party as the main reason for their poor polling. The loudest complaints came from the SIRA Party, which performed far below most observers’ expectations. It failed to win a single seat in the provincial assembly. SIRA took its complaints to the Constitutional Court—the court mandated to rule on election disputes in Indonesia—claiming that the Aceh Party had intimidated its voters through text messages, the burning of its paraphernalia and leaflets designed to smear its name. Calling for a repeat election, SIRA charged that the Aceh Party had robbed it of at least one seat in each of Aceh’s 23 districts and municipalities. While it was clear that the Aceh Party had used former combatant networks to intimidate voters in some areas, a post-election survey suggests that this had a limited impact on the final result.

From soldiers to politicians

Very few rebel movements have succeeded in transforming into political parties. El Salvador’s Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front and Mozambique’s National Resistance are prominent examples of successful transformations, but failed transformations such as Sierra Leone’s Revolutionary United Front and Burundi’s National Council for the Defence of Democracy are more typical of the experience of armed movements after conflict settlement. This is because former rebel movements face serious obstacles in creating viable political organisations. First, they often inherit weak state structures, which limit their ability to operate in all regions and to build broad-based support. The perilous
state of most post-conflict economies also limits the resources available and makes political parties vulnerable to capture by powerful economic interests. Under such conditions, corruption becomes commonplace, which undermines party institutionalisation and can in turn lead to public disillusionment. Other studies suggest that the social fragmentation caused by prolonged conflict makes it extremely difficult for political parties to build trust across different social, political and ethnic groups. Another challenge for former rebels is that they typically have limited experience in running government—negotiating disparate interests, setting policies and drawing up budgets. Managing a civil administration requires a different set of skills to managing an insurgency.

Indeed, the low success rate for armed movements seeking to transform themselves into political parties appears to have given some succour to many of Indonesia’s nationalist politicians who initially opposed political parties for Aceh. In a study of national leaders’ reactions to the Aceh Party’s victory in the 2009 local legislative elections, one study of political opinion revealed that many nationalist party leaders anticipated that the Aceh Party would not last more than two electoral cycles. Even those in favour of allowing GAM to transform itself into a political party doubted the party’s long-term survival. Some saw the Party’s victory as a novelty for voters—one that would wear off once people realised the Aceh Party was unable to deliver more than national parties and possibly even less.

Indeed, surveys showed that the Acehnese population held high expectations for the Aceh Party. Dominating the regional assemblies, the onus would clearly be on the former rebels to prove that they could govern more justly and effectively than the national parties that previously dominated the province’s political establishment. While the 2009 elections were testament to the Aceh Party’s capacity to mobilise supporters, following the election, Party leaders and representatives would need to demonstrate their capacities as law- and policy-makers. In facing this challenge, the Aceh Party enjoyed benefits rarely faced by political parties in post-conflict situations. First, while its capacity was diminished by conflict, the Government of Aceh continued to function during the conflict. Special autonomy meant that Aceh would be governed according to the laws of Indonesia and, in terms of institutional structures, was not so different from other parts of Indonesia. Relatively strong state structures would ensure that the Aceh Party could operate throughout the province and continue to build broad-based support. Indeed, the election results showed that the Aceh Party did enjoy broad-based support, even in some non-Acehnese minority areas such as Bener Meriah and Aceh Tenggah where pro-Jakarta militias had once opposed GAM forces. Second, while the conflict caused an estimated loss
of US$10.7 billion dollars to Aceh’s economy, the peace deal reached between GAM and the Government of Indonesia ensured that the Government of Aceh would have sufficient resources to deliver services and strengthen public administration. Aceh’s peace dividend was a greater share of local oil and gas revenues as well as the creation of a Special Autonomy Fund (dana otonomi khusus), which provides additional fiscal transfers from Jakarta. Currently $400 million per annum, the Special Autonomy Fund is set to increase each year until 2023 and then begin to decrease before being phased out entirely in 2028. Indeed, the Governor of Aceh, himself a former rebel, was in a position to spend lavishly on free hospital care and a generous scholarship programme for Acehnese students.

But the Aceh Party did face a number of challenges common to political parties emerging from armed struggles. The first was a lack of essential political skills. While the Aceh Party selected a range of candidates to stand on its ticket in the April 2009 elections, including several non-combatants, most of its elected members had no experience in government. Low capacity tested the Aceh Party during its first years in parliament where it struggled to produce any legislation. In fact the Aceh Party-dominated parliament passed no laws in the first year of the five-year parliamentary term. It was also six months into the financial year before the parliament managed to approve the provincial government’s budget, even though it was essentially a facsimile of the previous year’s budget. According to the Speaker of the House, only a small minority of new parliamentarians were capable of understanding the Government’s budget papers.37

The Aceh Party’s lacklustre parliamentary performance is partially explained by the Party’s campaign platform—i.e. that its primary concern was to optimise special autonomy, while much of the detail of power-sharing arrangements were still to be worked out. This included issues over land, trade, customs, immigration, the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission and the status of a new customary Acehnese leader (Wali Nanggroe)—a position inspired by Aceh’s former Sultan and one the Party intended to establish to honour GAM’s founder Hasan Di Tiro. As an example of the former rebels’ determination to strengthen their autonomous power, they proposed in draft legislation that the Wali Nanggroe be given powers to sack the elected Governor or the Province. In explaining the Party’s singular focus on power-sharing arrangements, Zakaria Saman, GAM’s former defence minister in exile and the Aceh Party’s candidate for the 2011 gubernatorial elections, explained that ‘we’ve been lied to twice before’, referring to Jakarta’s immaterialised promises of special autonomy in the early years of the Republic.38
While the former rebels’ overriding concern with the details of the power-sharing arrangements is understandable, it came at the expense of local policy and legislative work. Three years into the five-year term of the 2009 parliament, the Party did not have an economic policy. The Party also devoted much energy to ensuring its dominance within the Acehnese Parliament, preferring conflict to co-operation. Party leaders insisted, for example, that the Aceh Party be allocated two deputy speaker positions, which would deny another party an influential parliamentary position. According to national party representatives in Aceh, other parliamentarians were intimidated by the former rebels and, at least in the initial period, most were inclined to either go along with the Aceh Party’s demands or remain silent. The wait-and-see approach adopted by non-Aceh Party members of parliament also helps to explain the parliamentary paralysis experience during the first years of the new parliament.

It soon became apparent that the Aceh Party’s struggle to consolidate its power after the elections was inseparable from the efforts of GAM elites to entrench their economic power. In Indonesia’s system of patronage politics (in which Aceh is little different from other parts of the country) public office promised access to spoils. Politicians and senior civil servants typically enjoy wealth that is extremely disproportionate to their official incomes. It is common, for example, for senior civil servants on salaries of less than $12,000 per year to maintain several properties, luxury automobiles and to educate children abroad. Indonesia ranks 110th out of 178 countries in the Transparency International Corruption Perception Index. And within Indonesia, Aceh’s public administration has long had a reputation for being among Indonesia’s most corrupt regions—no doubt partly a reflection of the shadowy economic activity that accompanies prolonged conflict. After fighting for years in the mountains political power for GAM elites meant an opportunity to take their turn in the sun. With large funding available for post-tsunami reconstruction, ex-combatants, especially regional commanders, turned their attention to the lucrative construction business, setting up front companies and using intimidation to win contracts. While some ex-combatants owned legitimate businesses, many used political power to secure monopolies over trade in goods and services. One example was the exclusive licence for the import of salt, issued to an ex-combatant. Less entrepreneurial types resorted to old-fashioned extortion, knocking on doors of businesses and government departments to demand cash payments. One provincial government department head admitted that he was often forced into hiding whenever GAM paid a visit because he had no money to give them. Indeed, it appeared that Aceh Party leaders were
not interested in transforming the political system in Aceh so much as in entrenching their position in the neo-patrimonial institutional practices they inherited. Aceh’s new political elites were very quickly turning themselves into the province’s new economic elites, although it appears they have done so mostly by working with rather than displacing established economic elites. According to long-time observers of the Aceh conflict, this is hardly surprising. Former combatants did not have the capital and skills needed to succeed in business. In a system they knew to be deeply corrupt, they simply harnessed their newfound political power and capacity for intimidation on the ground to ensure the spoils that once flowed to the state’s security forces and Jakarta’s clients now flowed in their direction.\(^{42}\)

As might be expected, the predatory behaviour of some former combatants, especially those fond of conspicuous consumption, started to erode public sympathy for the Aceh Party. While Acehnese journalists, academics and activists were initially careful not to criticise the Aceh Party out of fear of reprisals, by 2010 people had slowly begun to speak out, possibly because divisions within the Party had neutralised the ‘fear’ factor. In Aceh’s coffee shops and university seminars, people began to publicly acknowledge what most knew to be true—that members of the Aceh Party were proving to be little different from the members of national parties and the political elites that came before them. So far, the party’s poor performance in the legislature does not appear to have dimmed its electoral prospects. Its candidates for the 2012 gubernatorial elections—GAM’s former Foreign Minister Zaini Abdullah and former rebel commander Muzakir Manaf won 55 percent of the vote, polling well ahead of incumbent Irwandi Yusuf, who was himself a former rebel, but chose to run against the Aceh Party as an independent.

Nevertheless, the Party’s longevity will at least partly depend on how it manages the internal divisions represented by the opposition of Irwandi Yusuf and his supporters. Since the founding of the Aceh Party a factional struggle between those loyal to the exiled leaders of the movement—the old guard—and GAM’s leaders on the ground during the final years of the fighting—the Young Turks—has simmered beneath the surface. The factional divide first emerged during the lead up to Gubernatorial elections in 2006—the first elections in which former rebels were permitted to participate. Because regulations did not yet exist to enable GAM to form its own political party, a clause in the Law on Governing Aceh (LOGA) allowed independent candidates to contest elections in Aceh. This, too, was an historic step, because it was the first time Indonesia had allowed candidates not backed by a national party or coalition of national parties to run for executive office.
Despite the opportunity to field independent candidates representing GAM, GAM’s leaders decided to nominate a local academic who was a GAM sympathiser as well as a member of the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP)—one of the larger Islamic parties in Indonesia and a member of the President’s national coalition. In the absence of its own party, GAM put forward its preferred candidate under the auspices of the United Development Party. This strategy appeared to be aimed at winning broad-based support as well as sending a conciliatory message to politicians in Jakarta and the armed forces, many of whom were extremely apprehensive about the prospect of former rebels taking power in Aceh. But it also relieved GAM of a major administrative burden. The LOGA permitted independent candidates to run, but local electoral regulations made it as difficult as possible for them to do so. Regulations produced by the national party-dominated parliament required independent candidates to produce signatures of support from no less than three per cent of the Acehnese population of 4.5 million—approximately 130,000 signatures. To make the task even more onerous, each signature had to be accompanied by a copy of the person’s national identity certificate (KTP).

But a Young Turk named Irwandi Yusuf nevertheless gathered the signatures needed and presented himself as an independent candidate, embarrassing the exiled leadership by accusing them of selling out to national parties. He argued (persuasively among ex-combatants and their sympathisers) that GAM did not fight all those years in the jungle just to get into bed with national parties at the first election. Educated in the US and well respected by former combatants, Irwandi had been incarcerated as a political prisoner when the Indian Ocean Tsunami struck on 24 December 2004. The tsunami destroyed parts of the prison walls, setting Irwandi and many others free. Irwandi subsequently became involved in the peace negotiations and, following the peace agreement, worked closely with the Aceh Monitoring Mission—the EU mission tasked with monitoring both sides’ commitment to the Helsinki peace agreement. Using his communication skills and harnessing combatant networks in support of his campaign, Irwandi eventually succeeded in winning Aceh’s first post-conflict gubernatorial elections. But his victory only exacerbated the division between the old guard and Irwandi’s supporters. While fences were partially mended following the founding of the Aceh Party in 2007 and the show of unity displayed by all ex-combatants during the historic 2009 legislative elections, divisions ran deep and would soon reappear. According to one insider, the exiled leadership never forgave Irwandi for the ‘disloyalty’ he displayed by competing against and beating GAM’s preferred candidate in 2006. In 2011 leaders of the Aceh Party sought to prevent the Governor from seeking a second term by
arguing that the provision in the Law on Governing Aceh—the legislation implementing the Helsinki Peace Agreement—allowing independent candidates to run for office was intended only as a temporary measure and would be revoked once GAM had formed its own political party.45 Party leaders made these claims despite the fact that Indonesia’s Constitutional Court had since ruled that the law could not prevent independent candidates from contesting any election. In a move bound to antagonise Jakarta, Aceh Party leaders claimed that the Constitutional Court decision undermined Acehnese autonomy.

While the Aceh Party now dominates executive and legislative government in Aceh, bitter divisions remain between the old guard and the Young Turks. Irwandi Yusuf’s bid for re-election was no match for the organizational might of the Aceh Party, which was able to more successfully mobilize former combatant networks, but Irwandi’s supporters still represent a large constituency that remains unreconciled with the Party’s leadership. Following his loss in the 2012 gubernatorial elections, Irwandi Yusuf established a new political party—the Aceh National Party (Partai Nasional Aceh) that will test loyalties in the 2014 legislative elections.

Concluding comments

The Government of Indonesia’s agreement to allow local political parties in Aceh was critical to securing the Helsinki peace agreement with the Free Aceh Movement. While the decision was made bravely by Indonesia’s President and Vice President in the face of strong domestic opposition, it has been vindicated by the emergence of the Aceh Party as a vehicle for transforming an armed struggle into a political movement. The Aceh Party has provided a platform for facilitating a fairly rapid integration of GAM elites into Aceh’s political society and economy. While this transformation has been accompanied by a redistribution of economic rewards in favour of the former rebels, it has nevertheless helped to maintain the peace. Aceh’s (and Indonesia’s) patrimonial politics have probably done more to change the former rebels than the Aceh Party has done to change the way Aceh is governed. The experience suggested that political parties based along former conflict lines can be successful tools for integration under certain conditions—i.e. where there has been a negotiated peace and where the armed struggle is for control over a part of a state’s territory rather than the entire state.

While the Aceh Party’s behaviour suggests that conflict-era habits die hard, international experience reminds us that successful transformations of rebel movements
into political movements are rare and typically take more than a decade. As the Aceh Party develops into a more ‘normal’ political party, it will probably need to reinvent itself in order to survive. Party longevity will depend on a number of factors: (1) an ability to learn to make policy and fulfil parliamentary responsibilities once power-sharing arrangements are finalised; (2) an ability to control the most egregious cases of predation by ex-combatants and; (3) an ability to manage internal divisions. If Party leaders are unable to make progress in these areas, the predictions of national party leaders in Jakarta will probably prove correct—that voters will soon realise that the Aceh Party’s behaviour and performance does little to favourably distinguish the Party from those that have come before. The fact that people are no more willing to criticise the Party suggests that voters might not be as enthusiastic in their support for the former rebels in the 2013 elections. Even if the Party loses some of its seats, motivated leadership, and a strong organisational structure based on the ex-combatant organisation KPA will ensure that the Party remains a political force for at least another election cycle. Beyond that the Party will need to find new means of appealing to Acehnese voters, by, for example, adopting an ideology and policy suite that transcends the power-sharing struggle with Jakarta. Once it has made that adaptation, the process of integration will be complete.

Endnotes

1. Collier, Wars, Guns and Votes; Brancati, Peace by Design.
2. Collier, Wars, Guns and Votes.
3. Lijphart, Democracy in Plural Societies; Horowitz, A Democratic South Africa.
4. Brancati, Peace by Design.
7. Ibid.
8. Rabasa and Chalk, Indonesia’s Transformation.
10. It should be noted that not all Acehnese were in favour of joining Indonesia. Even among Aceh’s varied aristocratic, religious and economic elites there were different views about Aceh’s political status. This variety of conflicting viewpoints underlay decades of intermittent conflict.
11. Van Dijk, Rebellion under the Banner of Islam.
14. Miller, Rebellion and Reform in Indonesia; Aspinall, Islam and Nation.
19. Most of these parties were knocked out for failing to have enough offices in the districts and subdistricts or the requisite number of members. One of the parties found ineligible to contest elections was the Aceh People’s Alliance for Women’s Concerns (PARA).
20. Interviews with Aceh Party Secretary M. Yahya, Aceh Party campaign headquarters, Banda Aceh, 17 June 2009; and Vice Governor of Aceh and SIRA Party Chair Muhamad Nazar, Banda Aceh, 10 October 2010.
21. In the 2009 election campaign, Aceh Party propaganda suggested that other local parties were no different from Indonesia’s national parties. See Hillman, ‘Political Parties and Post-Conflict Transition’.
22. Interview with Mawardi Ismail, former member of the Indonesian House of Representatives (Golkar) and Dean of the Law Faculty, Syiah Kuala University, Banda Aceh, 11 February 2010.
29. The relevant law is the provincial Qanun No 3/2007 on Managing General Elections in Aceh. By contrast, the national parliamentary threshold is 2.5 per cent.
30. SIRA’s request was dismissed by the Constitutional Court for lack of evidence. For the court’s ruling see: http://www.mahkamahkonstitusi.go.id/index.php?page=website.BeritaInternalLengkap&id=3235. [Accessed 30 April 2007].
31. Hillman, ‘Political Parties and Post-Conflict Transition’.
33. Ibid.
34. Hillman, ‘Ethnic Politics and Local Political Parties’.
37. Interview with Hasbi Abduallah, Chair, Aceh Legislative Assembly, Jakarta, 14 February 2010.
40. Another Transparency International survey conducted in Aceh in 2010 found that 51 per cent, 2,140 respondents, polled across the province believed that corruption had worsened since the tsunami of 2004. A further 38 per cent of respondents ranked the provincial administration as the most corrupt public institution in Aceh, followed by the police force and the provincial legislature. See ‘New Survey Paints Bleak Picture of Graft in Aceh’. Jakarta Post, 22 June 2010.
41. Interview with provincial government department head (anonymous), Banda Aceh, 8 December 2010.
42. Aspinall, ‘Combatants to Contractors’.
44. Interview with Hasballah M Saad, Acehnese politician and former Minister for Human Rights, Jakarta, 20 August 2010.
45. ICG, ‘GAM vs GAM in the Aceh Elections’.

References


