

# Aceh elections: A foregone conclusion

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**General elections in Indonesia are held every five years, the most recent one being in April 2009. But this time round, the elections in Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra were very different. For the first time, the Acehnese voted in free elections after almost three decades of conflict. The former rebel movement GAM had transformed itself into a political party and fielded its own candidates in the local elections.**

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Aceh is the only Indonesian province where people have been allowed to set up their own parties. Six local parties have been officially recognized: Partai Aceh (PA, the Aceh Party); Partai Suara Independen Rakyat Aceh (PSIRA, the Aceh People's Independent Voice Party); Partai Rakyat Aceh (PRA, the Aceh People's Party); Partai Daulat Aceh (PDA, the Sovereign Aceh Party); Partai Bersatu Aceh (PBA, the United Aceh Party); and Partai Aceh Aman dan Sejahtera (PAAS, the Safe and Prosperous Aceh Party).

The participation of local parties was a very significant breakthrough, a minor revolution in the context of Indonesia's unitary political system. Successive rebellions since the birth of the Indonesian Republic in 1945, not only in the periphery but also in the heartland of Java, led to the increasing adoption a highly centralized system. Although in 1949 Indonesia became a federal state, that lasted for little more than a year. A series of rebellions, including one in Aceh, led in 1958 to a consensus among the ruling elite in Jakarta that a strong unitary system was the only option.

The rebellion that erupted in Aceh in 1976 under the leadership of GAM, the Aceh Freedom Movement, enjoyed a strong mass base of support. After the authoritarian ruler Suharto was forced to stand down in May 1998, political events in Aceh made great strides forward. While the military tried to crush the independence movement, decision-makers in Jakarta realized that a political solution was the only way to proceed. Aceh underwent several stages in a peace process, with dialogue the main thread.

The GAM rebellion had all the features of a widespread rebellion: armed resistance, a centralized Indonesia army trying to crush

The participation of local parties was a very significant breakthrough, a minor revolution the rebellion, a huge refugee problem, the devastating impact of the Tsunami in December 2004, a badly damaged economy, and a high-profile GAM government in exile.

The peace process in Aceh led to an agreement on 15 August 2005 in Helsinki. The Memorandum of Understanding signed by GAM and the Indonesian government became the basis for comprehensive peace. It provided for the establishment of local parties, which were set up after the enactment of a special law on Aceh in Jakarta.

## **ELECTORAL DEFIANCE**

The April 2009 election in Aceh was indeed historic. The Acehnese had a long tradition of self-rule under a sultanate. In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they defied Dutch colonial rule and rebelled against the centralist rule of Jakarta. In the 1950s, a movement called Darul Islam defied the Sukarno government; agreement was reached only after Aceh had been given special autonomy status.

It is striking that, during the long conflict, there was a distinct pattern in Aceh, in contrast to other provinces. Under Suharto, the political system was basically a one-party system which allowed two other minor parties to take part in elections to create the impression that Suharto's New Order system was multi-party. Golkar (Golongan Karya, Functional Groups) was the ruling party while the PDI (Indonesian Democracy Party) resulted from the forced merger of nationalist and Christian parties and the PPP (Partai Pembangunan Persatuan, United Development Party) was a Muslim federation. Although 'golkarisation' was achieved in other provinces by a variety of methods including brutal force and bribery, the Aceh electorate persistently defied the system and voted in large numbers for the PPP.

In the five-year ritual, Golkar won huge majorities every time in all the provinces except Aceh. It was not until 1994, the last elections under Suharto, that the Acehnese electorate finally succumbed to Golkar promises and projects. Then in 1999, after the fall of Suharto, Golkar won again but by this time, its support had eroded.

## **FROM BULLETS TO BALLOT**

The elections in April 2009 were the ultimate proof of the success of the peace agreement reached in 2005. Jakarta agreed to grant considerable autonomy to Aceh while the Acehnese were willing to accept this peace gesture from Jakarta. GAM gave up its demand for independence and surrendered most of its weapons. Many combatants/guerillas almost overnight assumed the task of safeguarding the peace process while at the same time participating in the post-Tsunami reconstruction process.

The 'return' of guerillas into society, back to normal life, is often the most intractable part of a peace process. Inevitably Aceh encountered problems, but relatively speaking, the reintegration of GAM combatants proceeded much more smoothly than in post-conflict area elsewhere in the world.

There are several reasons for this, the foremost being that as a grassroots movement, GAM was able to cope well with the transformation; its members changed from being combatants to handling a variety of jobs within the economy and helping to safeguard the peace process. Many GAM activists were elected to administrative posts in the local elections and some found themselves being catapulted

into positions such as provincial governor, mayor or district chief. The economic boom, supported by substantial contributions of aid money from around the world, provided plenty of opportunities for ex-combatants to participate in the reconstruction.

## **FAST PACE OF DEVELOPMENTS**

A series of events in Aceh in the past few years have dramatically transformed the region. There were two major events: the peace agreement between the government and GAM, the outcome of negotiations that had started in 2004 and ended in August 2005; and the disastrous tsunami that devastated the region in December 2004. These two events represented a turning point for Aceh, politically as well as economically.

On the back of the peace agreement and the massive post-tsunami reconstruction programme, developments moved fast. Two important institutions were established. The AMM, the Aceh Monitoring Mission was set up to safeguard the peace process and coordinated by experts from the EU and ASEAN countries.

The BRR, the Body for Reconciliation and Reconstruction, took over the difficult task of regulating, coordinating and overseeing all the reconstruction projects handled by aid agencies from all the parts of the world.

The BRR completed its job just prior to the April 2009 elections and is widely recognized as having accomplished its tasks very successfully. It reached all its physical reconstruction targets - rebuilding houses, schools, hospitals, roads. But it was probably even more important that Aceh retained its own structures with the grass-roots structure of the resistance and the Indonesian administrative structures, from governor down to the villages. In contrast with what has so often happened in other disaster areas of the world, the huge funds which flooded in from foreign agencies did not suffocate the Acehnese.

## **THE CAMPAIGN**

The election results achieved by local parties were a foregone conclusion; early opinion polls predicted a big victory for Partai Aceh (PA) and Partai SIRA (PSIRA). National parties did very poorly and in contrast to other provinces, the number of banners and leaflets was rather limited. In the GAM strongholds such as East Aceh and North Aceh, the streets were covered with PA banners and flags.

But things shifted in the weeks before the elections. The leadership of the PA became more vociferous towards other local parties and it became evident that animosity was bubbling over among the rank and file. From the outset, the Acehnese expressed support for wellknown figures in the PA, leaving the other the reintegration of GAM combatants proceeded much more smoothly than in postconflict areas elsewhere. In the GAM strongholds, the streets were covered with Partai Aceh banners and flags local parties with virtually nothing. The Acehnese electorate chose identity politics, with the most attractive figures being in the PA. As for the PSIRA and the PRA, despite their impressive record of advocacy in favour of democracy, the 2009 election was a huge disappointment. The only other local party to win a seat in the Aceh provincial assembly was the PDA, a local Muslim party.

A close political affinity has emerged between sections of GAM and the incumbent President in Jakarta, SBY. The majority of Acehnese realize that a

sustainable peace in Aceh will be much more secure in the hands of the SBY government. When SBY visited Aceh two weeks before the elections, thousands of people gathered in the main stadium in Banda Aceh to welcome him. The huge crowd was mobilized by Sofyan Daud, a former GAM commander and a well known public figure. This also happened to a lesser extent for Golkar the party of Jusuf Kalla, the Vice-President. The peace process was indeed largely the product of Kalla and his team. The PD won ten of the 69 seats in the assembly, while Golkar won 8 seats.

However, it should be noted that the PA, despite its broad base and effective campaigning, failed to achieve a majority in the Aceh provincial assembly. It won 33 of the 69 seats and did not do well in several districts, including the capital Banda Aceh. There has been significant mobility and change in the composition of the population of the capital. Many non- Acehnese have been able to find good jobs in post Tsunami reconstruction projects, reflecting a healthy plurality of votes.

During the forthcoming parliamentary term, which starts in October, the following parties will hold seats in the Banda Aceh City Council: Partai Demokrat with 8 seats, the PA with 6 seats, the PKS (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, the Prosperous Justice Party) with 5 seats, Golkar with 3 seats, PDA (Partai Demokrat Aceh, a local party) with 3 seats, PAN (Partai Amanat Nasional, National Mandate Party) with 2 seats and the PPP, PSIRA (a local party) and PBB each with one seat. Thus it certainly appears to be true that despite the PA's majority, the plurality of the Acehnese political landscape has been secured.

## ELECTION RESULTS

The Acehnese took part in four elections on 9 April: The general election for the Indonesian Parliament, the DPR; the local elections for the Aceh Provincial Assembly the DPRA, and the Regency/District Legislatures the DPRK; and the Jakartabased DPD (Dewan Perwakilan Daerah, Regional Representatives Council). Two of the elections, the local ones, for the DPRA and the DPRK, are more interesting because of the participation of local parties. As had been predicted, there was a huge change of personnel in these elections.

The election for the 69 seats in the DPRA (Aceh Provincial Assembly) resulted in the introduction of more than 80 percent new faces. This was also the case with the DPRK; there are many new faces occupying the 645 seats in 23 districts and cities. However, only five women were elected to the DPRA. A new coalition has emerged between sections of GAM and SBY

### **The New DPRA**

#### Party Percentage Seats

Partai Aceh (local) 46.91% 33

Partai Demokrat 10.84% 10

Partai Golkar 6.63% 8

PAN 3.87% 5

PKS 3.80% 4

PPP 3.45% 3

PDA (local) 1.85% 1

PKB 1.41% 1

PBB 1.74% 1

PKPI 1.92% 1

PDI-P 1.01% 1

Partai Patriot 0.70% 1  
Party

In the DPRK elections, the results were even more striking. In the GAM bastions, the PA performed very well, winning a majority of seats. In Pidie district, the PA won 34 out of 45 seats. It also won a huge victory in North Aceh, getting 32 out of the 45 seats. In East Aceh, the PA won 25 of the 35 seats.

But in places where other ethnic groups live, the PA was less dominant. In Central Aceh, Partai Demokrat managed to win 4 seats while the PA won only three seats. A variety of other parties secured one or more of the 31 seats. In Aceh Singkil, a rather isolated district in the southwest, Golkar emerged as the winner, while in Bener Meriah and Subulussalam, PAN was the biggest party. The DPR elections were held to elect members of the national parliament in Jakarta. Only national parties were allowed to participate. The results were as follows: Partai Demokrat (PD), Democrat Party won 6 seats: Teuku Riefky Harsa, Nova Iriansyah, H.M. Ali Yacob, Mirwan Amir, Muh. Azhari and Teuku Irwan.

Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) won 2 seats: Nasir Djamil and Raihan Iskandar Partai Golongan Karya (Golkar) won 2 seats: Sayed Fuad Zakaria and Marzuki Daud Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP) won 2 seats: Tengku Moh. Faisal Amin and Teuku Taufiqulhadi Partai Amanat Nasional (PAN) 1 seat: H. Azwar Abubakar The DPD is a relatively new legislative body, comparable to a senate in other countries. Each province is entitled to choose four members of the DPD, which meets in Jakarta. DPD candidates are

often a combination of several characteristics. Often they are well known local figures but more than not, they are also endorsed by one or several parties.

For example, Tengku Abdurrahman, a local Muslim preacher who is well known in many parts of Aceh won the support of the PA and therefore secured a seat.

### **DPD members**

1 Tengku Abdurrahman BTM 234.118 votes

2. Bachrum Manyak 172,417 votes

3. Farhan Hamid 121,747 votes

4. A. Khalid 101,808 votes

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<http://tapol.gn.apc.org/elections/updates/Issue%208%20article%20final.pdf>