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Post-Elections Aceh: An Outlook for Peace and Security

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With the national elections over and Partai Aceh securing an impressive win in the previously strife-torn province,, what does this mean for security in Aceh? Are there still separatist aspirations in spite of the peace accord that ended the civil war in Aceh?

POLITICAL CONFLICTS broke out in Aceh in the run up to the 2009 legislative elections. Although the violence had a negative impact on the security situation in the province, it did not cause a wider wave of separatist violence. The pre-election conflicts were the product of a series of events marked by tense political settings and frictions among local actors. According to the International Crisis Group, these may have been caused by an unequal allocation of funds, projects, or even drugs business, on top of political competition. To make things worse, the threats were in some cases carelessly attributed to ex-members of the separatist movement Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM).

Outcomes of the Legislative Elections

In the April legislative elections, the Acehnese voted for four representatives: one each for the national parliament in Jakarta; the Aceh Legislative Council (DPRA); the municipal level in Aceh (DPRK); and the Regional Representative Council (DPD). The success of the elections has added to the legitimacy of the Indonesian government and the peace process in Aceh.

Partai Aceh (PA) obtained the largest number of votes in the elections — 46.93% of the total number of votes cast in Aceh, giving them 33 out of 69 seats in the parliament in Aceh. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's Democrat Party (PD) secured the second rank with a vote gain of 10.84%, followed by Golkar Party with 6.64%. The fourth and fifth places were occupied by the National Mandate Party (PAN) and Prosperous Justice Party (PKS).. The results show that nationalist parties remain influential in Aceh. More importantly, they showed that the peace agreement is holding well and is anchored around a middle ground -- between the centralisation formula for Aceh by the Indonesian government and the independence aspirations of the Acehnese.

With the political victory of the PA, there is greater optimism for peace in Aceh. What this means is that there are legitimate non-violent ways to address the sense of injustice, exploitation and marginalisation in Aceh. However, there are still open questions testing the peace and security in Aceh. Are the ex-GAM members still a threat? Does the threat of militancy and political violence still prevail and do the Acehnese still harbour aspirations for separatism and independence?

Lingering suspicions

Mistrust and suspicion exist between the Indonesian military (TNI) and ex-GAM members over the lingering independence aspirations by the latter. The PA has denied this aspiration, stating they will conform strictly to the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the Government of Indonesia and GAM on August 2005. The head of PA's Central Party Office Muzakir Manaf — a former GAM commander — mentioned in the national newspaper *Kompas* that PA will continue to pursue its political activities in the framework of a unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia.

Even if there was a desire for independence, it is unclear if GAM could influence the outcome. Entry into politics has caused GAM to fragment into at least four different parts -- GAM, Komite Pemulihan Aceh (KPA), Partai Aceh and parts of the local government. GAM has been diluted by the inclusion of non-GAM members into the respective components. Furthermore, there is now a plurality of influences in Aceh, not only from GAM, as there are other players involved in the reconstruction of post-conflict Aceh.

But does the pre-election violence suggest a return to armed struggle? The evidence is less than conclusive. While the motivations and perpetrators remain unknown, the very least is that the violence has more to do with local issues and influence. If this is in fact the case, it means that the parties are competing for control of local resources rather than over their commitment to independence. As long as the political process delivers the goods and services, there will be little desire to return to the use of violence.

The presidential election

What significance does the recently concluded presidential election have on Aceh? Current President Yudhoyono and Vice President Jusuf Kalla (JK) were both significant players in the Aceh peace process. Prior to the elections, the media had made it clear who the people of Aceh would support: an SBY-JK pair for president and vice president should they team up, SBY however eventually picked Budiono as his running mate.

However, SBY's Partai Demokrat secured 40 % of the total votes in Aceh, an endorsement of his contribution to the peace process. This is a reverse of the previous dominance of JK's Golkar, which used to enjoy a superior position in the province. The significant decline in its support base since 2004 is bad for Golkar.

In the presidential election, it was announced that the SBY-Budiono pair secured first position with 599,277 votes or 92.9% of the votes in Aceh . Following in the second place was the pair of Jusuf Kalla and Wiranto (JK-WIN) with 30,431 votes, while trailing last was the pair of Megawati and Prabowo (Mega-Pro) with 15,141 votes

The remarkable victory of the SBY-Budiono duo in Aceh for this presidential election also suggests that the trust between people of Aceh and the central government has recovered. Moreover the results show that the people of Aceh are entering a better state of relations with the power centre in Jakarta..

What Next?

Ultimately, sustainable peace and stability in Aceh rely on two key developments. Firstly, Partai Aceh must be able to prove to the electorate that it is able to deliver the aspirations of the Acehnese for economic development, security and progress. The party must also assure that it can be a responsible representative in the central government.

Secondly and ultimately, it must prove to be an effective alternative for the Acehnese people, rather than turning to violence to achieve an independence which in itself may not guarantee better lives for the people. On the part of the central government, Aceh should continue to be part of its national agenda. It must ensure sustainable development for all people, including the Acehnese who have now tied their future with the Republic of Indonesia.

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