

Preface and Acknowledgments

This book originated during a visit I made to Aceh, Indonesia, as part of a group of election monitors in June 1999. This was my first trip to Aceh, and it was a very affecting one. Indonesia's first democratic elections in more than forty years were being celebrated around the country as a victory of the anti-authoritarian impulse that had led to the collapse of the Soeharto government a year earlier. Yet in Aceh there was an atmosphere of fear, very low voter participation, and a rising tide of violence.

As I made return visits over succeeding years, and as my plans for this book developed, my aim was to write a study that explained why the political dynamics in Aceh were so different from the dynamics in other parts of Indonesia. This effort involved me in trying to understand the historical, ideological, and social roots of the separatist insurgency, an endeavor that eventually led me to engage with wider theories and debates about nationalism, about its relations with religion, and about civil war.

From the start, however, another aim was to try to tell the story of the Aceh conflict from the perspective of the participants. Some excellent studies of the conflict already existed, but their authors had been hampered by the difficulty of gaining access to Aceh during the Soeharto years. Most of these studies stressed the broad structural context of violence rather than the experiences and views of the conflict actors themselves.

This book therefore draws not only on Indonesian and foreign press reports and archival material, but also on several hundred interviews with Free

Aceh Movement leaders and fighters, nongovernmental organization and student activists, religious leaders, politicians, academics, military officers, and others. I was very privileged to meet with such a wide range of people and to have so many of them generously share their time, experiences, and views with me. Often they did so not once but several times over a period of years. This book would not have been possible without their support, and I am very grateful for it.

It was not always easy to conduct this research. One problem was that I did not consistently have access to Aceh. After a period of relative openness after the 1998 fall of Soeharto, renewed conflict made visits increasingly difficult. Eventually, after the declaration of a "military emergency" in May 2003, severe restrictions were placed on visits by even foreign journalists and humanitarian workers, let alone researchers. For a time it was no longer possible for me to visit. The situation changed after the terrible Indian Ocean tsunami of December 26, 2004, when thousands of humanitarian workers flooded into Aceh. At the urging of some of my Acehnese friends, I traveled once more to Banda Aceh, the capital of the province, and spent several weeks there playing a very minor role in the relief effort. Officials in the Indonesian embassy in Canberra, Australia, however, apparently took exception to my participation in a public seminar about Aceh in Sydney around that time, which led to my being banned from visiting Indonesia. The ban seemed to end my hopes of conducting further field research for this book, but the successful conclusion of the peace process in August 2005 meant that a year later the ban was revoked and I could once again enter the country.

Even when it was possible to visit, it was generally difficult to conduct research in Aceh. The poor security situation often meant it was difficult to travel, and conducting interviews could be risky, both for myself and for informants. During the conflict years I did not stay long in villages where guerrillas were operating or risk visiting their camps. On some visits I did not venture far from Banda Aceh. I was able to make up partly for this deficiency by meeting rebel leaders and supporters in exile on several trips to Sweden, Malaysia, the United States, and elsewhere, and by travelling more freely in Aceh after August 2006, when I had the privilege of meeting many former combatants and commanders.

Another problem was dealing with the differing expectations that people in Aceh had of me. Although many government officials suspected that foreigners visiting Aceh had the single purpose of speeding its exit from Indonesia, a less threatening but equally uncomfortable situation sometimes arose when Acehnese nationalists made the same assumption and tried to enlist me

as an adviser to their struggle. People on both sides of the Aceh conflict will find things in this book that displease them or with which they disagree. I hope only that I kept the promises I made to try to do justice to the views and experiences of my informants and to convey them honestly.

In this regard, it is worth making one further note about method. In Aceh, as in many countries engaged in civil war, it was often difficult to get an accurate account of events. Conflict actors often had interests in denying responsibility for violence they had committed, in keeping their activities secret, and in confusing their adversaries and the public with misinformation. Some victims of violence found the identities and motives of their attackers to be terrifyingly unclear. Some people tried to take credit for activities in which they were not involved, or claimed to have privileged information about little-known secrets. In this environment, fearful and sometimes fantastic rumors and theories flourished: about who was responsible for violence, about the hidden intentions behind it, about internal conflicts and plots among the guerrillas, and about "black" operations by state intelligence agents and their proxies. Media sources were useful for many purposes, but journalists too operated with limited information and often feared reprisals for their reporting. Although I read many thousands of newspaper reports, I tended to be careful in relying on them to reconstruct events, especially during particularly repressive periods. Wherever possible I tried to be methodologically conservative, emphasizing interviews with individuals who had directly participated in the events I discuss in the book, and relying mostly on them to build my analysis. I tried to check such material with other informants or sources wherever I could, and where doubts remain I have tried to indicate these in the text. The end result is that I have also excluded from my analysis masses of sensational but unverified material. Even so, because the subject matter of the book is largely concerned with conspiracy and secrets, it is quite possible that it still contains important omissions and errors. This book is a first draft of the history of Aceh's separatist conflict. If tensions in Aceh continue to decline as time passes, it is hoped that fuller and more detailed histories will be written.

This book was also written in conjunction with an East-West Center project on the dynamics and management of internal conflict in Asia that ran for several years and involved a wide variety of persons with expertise on many of the region's most bitter conflicts. I am very grateful to the Center's Muthiah Alagappa for inviting me to participate in this inspirational project, and for his support over the following years, and to the many project participants for their ideas and input. Initial funding for the research was provided by grants from the East-West Center, the University of New South Wales, the Australian

National University, and the University of Sydney. Colleagues at the University of Sydney were very generous in allowing me to take leave from teaching soon after I began to work there. Most of the research funding was provided by a Discovery Grant from the Australian Research Council, without which many of the field trips and interviews and much of the archival work would not have been possible. The KITLV Institute in Leiden, The Netherlands, provided a one-month fellowship to allow me to finalize the manuscript. Two reviewers for Stanford University Press as well as Gerry van Klinken, Benedict Kerkvliet, Antje Missbach, and Sidney Jones read the whole manuscript and provided many useful comments.

Several students I supervised—Madeleine Foley, Michelle Miller, Paul Zeccola, Antje Missbach, Iskandar Zulkarnaen, and Muhammad Rizwan—wrote theses or studies on Aceh. I am grateful for the ideas and stimulation that working with them provided. At different points research assistance was provided by Sarah Macdonald, Tim Adair, Sally White, Elisabeth Jackson, Thuy Thu Pham, Allison Ley, and Iwan Dzulvan Amir, and I am very grateful for their help. The Hoover Institution generously allowed me to access its archives. I am also very grateful to Geoffrey Burn and Mariana Raykov at Stanford University Press, and to Alice Rowan for her careful copyediting. Scattered throughout this book are paragraphs derived from articles I published previously, including “The Construction of Grievance: Natural Resources and Identity in a Separatist Conflict” (*Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 2007, 51(6): 950–972), “From Islamism to Nationalism in Aceh, Indonesia” (*Nations and Nationalism*, 2007, 13(2): 245–263), “Sovereignty, the Successor State and Universal Human Rights: History and the International Structuring of Acehnese Nationalism” (*Indonesia*, 2002, 73: 1–24), and “Modernity, History, and Ethnicity: Indonesian and Acehnese Nationalism in Conflict” (*Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 2002, 36(1): 3–33). I thank the publishers for permission to reuse this material.

Many Acehnese assisted by sharing their experiences, providing documents, and helping me to contact others. They are too numerous to mention all of them by name. In Malaysia, Nur Djuli and Taufik were very helpful; in Sweden, Malik Mahmud, Bakhtiar Abdullah, and Zaini Abdullah, as well as Dr. Husaini Hasan and Yusuf Daud, were all exceptionally generous with their time. In Aceh and elsewhere Otto Syamsuddin Ishak, Nezar Patria, Hendra Budian, and Aguswandi, who have become good friends, were always stimulating discussion partners; the last two also allowed me to stay in their homes. Abu Karim hosted me in Bireuen; Iskandar Zulkarnaen and Muhammad Rizwan were generous and informative hosts in Lhokseumawe. Saleh

Amin showed me around South Aceh. Arie Maulana not only helped me enormously during repeated visits to Aceh, he also put me up at his house, hosted many invigorating late-night conversations, and has become a very close friend.

One young man whose help I especially remember is Zulfikar. A twenty-four-year-old student at the State Institute for Islamic Studies, he accompanied me around Banda Aceh in 2002 and searched for articles in the office of the local newspaper. He was a quiet and thoughtful young man. Several months later I learned that he and a colleague, Mukhlis, had been abducted while accompanying village people displaced by the conflict who were holding a protest in Bireuen. Zulfikar's friends recognized the abductors as members of the local military intelligence (Satuan Gabungan Intel, or SGI) post and even took a photograph of the vehicle that took him and Mukhlis away. The authorities have always denied they took either man. Zulfikar's whereabouts have never been determined and his friends assume he was killed. This book is dedicated to his memory. He is one of many people whose lives were ended prematurely by the Aceh conflict.

A Note on Spelling

The territory referred to in this book as *Aceh* has and continues to be spelled in various ways in the Latin alphabet. Until the mid-twentieth century, variations such as *Achin*, *Acheen*, and *Acheh* were often used in English. Then, following Dutch spelling convention, *Atjeh* became the standard in Indonesian. After the introduction of the "perfected spelling" system in 1972, *Atjeh* was changed to *Aceh*. Many Acehnese nationalists reject this spelling, however, preferring *Atjeh* or *Acheh*. In this book I keep to the standard modern Indonesian spelling, except in quotations.