



The Aceh Peace Accords: one year later and still holding by Allene Masters

After 30 years of conflict in the rebellious province of Aceh, a peace agreement was reached in August 2005 following negotiations in Helsinki, Finland. When success is achieved in ending seemingly intractable conflicts, skeptics tend to be suspicious of the good news or at the least question whether the deal will hold. At a recent United States-Indonesia Society (USINDO) event, Professor Michael Morfit described a host of converging reasons, some of them serendipitous, why the Aceh agreement was possible, and suggested that after one year the prospects for a permanent hold are reasonably good.

His remarks to USINDO were based on his research, commissioned by the Indonesian Council on World Affairs and presented at a government-sponsored conference in Jakarta on August 14 commemorating the first anniversary of the accords. His paper is entitled "Staying on the Road to Helsinki: Why the Aceh Agreement was Possible in August 2005." Morfit took pains to describe the freedom he had to pursue his research and a lack of editorial pressure from the government.

The report describes teamwork between President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) and Vice President Jusuf Kalla, belying some Jakarta rumors that there is tension between the two officials. "I took care of the political parties and SBY took care of the military," Morfit quoted Kalla as saying. When asked about the rumors of tension, each man (in separate interviews) dismissed the notion. Morfit said the two leaders shared a united vision, for slightly different reasons.

For Kalla, an Aceh agreement would burnish his credentials as a peacemaker after his decisive role in resolving communal violence in Maluku and Central Sulawesi in 2003. Morfit described Kalla as a "perpetual motion machine," indefatigable in pursuing avenues for dialogue.

For SBY, it was his long-held belief that the Aceh rebellion, a conflict of 30 years duration, could not be quashed by military force. "We must negotiate, because otherwise they will always come back," was SBY's reasoning.

Morfit also suggested that one of SBY's first acts as president was the key to the start of the peace process. The president withdrew the letter of nomination, submitted at the end of President Megawati's tenure, of General Ryamizard Ryacudu to be armed forces (TNI) chief of staff, opting instead to continue General Endriartono Sutarto in office. Ryamizard, a hard-line military commander, would never have supported peace talks, according to Morfit. The president also instructed Endriartono to tell the TNI commanders on the ground that "This is a new era. Your job is to support government policy, or resign." This admonition stuck. Ryamizard was sidelined and finally retired after about six

months. Morfit cited this firm and early action as a rebuttal to the charge that SBY is slow to make decisions and cautious in acting upon them. Getting the TNI to hew to the government's line also advanced democratization through civilian control of the military.

Morfit discussed the conventional wisdom on reasons for the peace opening and his interpretations:

The tsunami of December 26, 2004. This tragedy, wiping out personnel and supplies of both sides, is widely credited as the principal reason why both sides were willing to talk. It was a contributing factor, said Morfit, but actually the agreement to start talks in Helsinki, Finland, was finalized on December 23, and was the culmination of 18 months of intense efforts.

The success of Indonesian military operations. The impact was never complete, according to Morfit, who said the government knew that no military solution was possible.

The energy and skill of Kalla as interlocutor. This was important, but Kalla could never have accomplished a reconciliation alone, because it was always the military, over whom he had little influence, that obstructed progress.

The collapse of GAM (the Aceh independence movement) as a fighting organization. "What emerges is not what I expected," Morfit said. It was GAM that stood back, aloof, while the government side frantically tried to make contact. Morfit said GAM showed great discipline and cohesion, considering that its leader was in Sweden, its supporters widely spread out, and its soldiers suffered years of deprivation in the hills of Aceh. However, he said, GAM is "starting to fray." The accords, which give GAM the right to form a political party to contest upcoming elections, has not in fact done so. Individual GAM leaders are joining existing parties instead.

The determination of the government. The Government of Indonesia initially was actually rather disorganized, Morfit found, and was beset by policy differences. It was SBY who forged coherence and discipline, Morfit said, which has been sustained and is getting stronger.

The role of "inspired amateurs and experienced experts." Morfit described the role of Juha Christensen, a private Finnish citizen, who took it upon himself to pursue the possibility of dialogue. He was unsuccessful until he was able to secure an introduction to the former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari. Ahtisaari proved to be a tough mediator who insisted that an independent Aceh had absolutely no chance of international support, and who brooked no nonsense at the negotiation table. "Gentlemen, don't waste my time!" he is reported to have said. This tough approach paid off. Ahtisaari also brought international stature, as a former head of state, to the talks. Additionally it was he who brought in the European

Union to help monitor the agreement, a group more effective than ASEAN as an organization and more trusted than the United Nations.

This was a characteristic Indonesian process, Morfit wrote in his report:

“Although assistance and support came from outside, this was fundamentally an Indonesian process driven by Indonesian actors and managed in an Indonesian manner....a pattern of informal and highly personal contacts, the use of intermediaries and personal networks, informal and behind the scenes negotiations, ad hoc trial-and-error approaches.

“These patterns were reminiscent of typical Indonesian negotiations over marriages or business alliances. They may help explain not only why the Helsinki negotiations reached agreement, but also why that agreement has endured.”

Other considerations, brought out in discussion, were that government decentralization policies facilitated the agreement with the GAM for greater Acehese autonomy, but there was no demand for the implementation of Islamic law. The true motivation of the GAM has always been intense nationalism and the recognition of Acehese identity, not religion. In this setting, the motivations of the armed forces for agreeing to the withdrawal of the bulk of their forces from Aceh remain murky, but the TNI received a budget increase that might have been an offset for the cost of previous armed operations.

In Aceh today, moreover, there is less interest in national reconciliation and a human rights reckoning than there is in GAM participation in elections and forming a new popularly-based government for the region. Finally, the United States has played a constructive role in Aceh by generously funding post-disaster reconstruction and facilitative assistance for the peace process.

Allene Masters is Senior Advisor, United States-Indonesia Society in Washington, DC. Dr. Morfit is an adjunct professor at the American University's School of International Service and the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service. He previously worked for Development Alternatives, Inc. as vice president of Indonesia operations from 1996 to 2005 and before that for USAID in Washington and Jakarta.