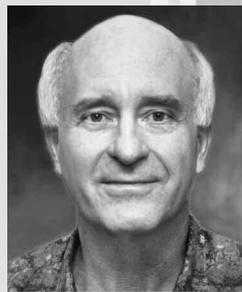


## *Aceh After the Tsunami*

As the Indonesian Province Rebuilds,  
the Challenges of  
Physical and Spiritual Recovery

**F**ew tragic events in history have so immediately captured the world's attention and generated so deep an empathetic response as the massive earthquake and resulting tsunami of December 2004. Striking with terrifying swiftness and force on the morning of December 26 in the Indian Ocean off the northwest coast of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, the losses were enormous. Some 200,000 lives were extinguished, over one million people lost their homes and livelihoods, and provincial economies from the western tip of Indonesia, to southern Thailand, coastal Sri Lanka, the Maldives Islands and southeastern India suffered heavy damage.

Many of the world's 6.5 billion people witnessed this devastation on television through video and still images captured on digital cameras and cell phones by those fleeing the tsunami, transmitted by reporters quick to the scene. People touched by these scenes, including school children, religious groups, governments, donor agencies and tens of thousands of volunteers contributed to perhaps the single greatest philanthropic outpouring in history. A large portion of this attention was focused on the area that suffered 65 percent of the casualties and the most widespread destruction, the special autonomous region of Aceh. Over the course of the rescue period, donations to Aceh reached \$7,100 per person affected by the tsunami.



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## A Historic Overview of the Autonomous Region

*Located on the northern tip of Sumatra, the westernmost point of the sprawling island nation of Indonesia, Aceh's total population is under two million in a nation of 210 million. It lays claim to having the first converts to Islam in island Southeast Asia, dating to the 1290s, and in the succeeding three centuries developed a powerful trading kingdom, closely identified with Islam.*

*Aceh considered itself the "front porch" to Mecca and regularly sent envoys to the Ottoman Empire, viewing itself as encompassed in the Islamic spiritual empire represented by the Caliph, the Ottoman sultan. The political fortunes of Aceh declined after fierce competition with the Portuguese to control regional trade early in the 16th century, and 20 years of bloody resistance 350 years later as the Dutch absorbed Aceh into its Netherlands East Indies colony.*

*When this colony achieved its independence as "Indonesia" following World War II, Aceh embarked on an uneasy relationship with the new republic over the next five decades, including periods ranging from low-level resistance to open rebellion. The discovery and exploitation of oil and natural gas fields from the mid-1970s raised the level of prosperity in Aceh but sowed deeper seeds of bitterness as most of the profits by-passed the province for the Indonesian central government in Jakarta. The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) grew from a small irritant to a major headache for the Indonesian government, and raised the specter of disintegration of the Indonesian nation, and the possibility of an unholy alliance of outside Islamist extremists with GAM, given the Acehnese reputation for Islamic devotion. GAM fund-raising in Malaysia, visible to the naked eye across the narrow straits of Malacca, made the fighting in Aceh a regional concern.*

*Aceh in the hours before the tsunami struck was a society deeply divided by the fighting between GAM and the Indonesian Army. In the battle for control, civilians were intimidated and killed by both sides. Two respected university presidents (rectors) had been gunned down in broad daylight. Leaving home after dark was especially hazardous, and even traveling on main roads subjected car and bus passengers to random roadblocks, extortion and murder by Indonesian soldiers or GAM militants. Few could imagine what dramatic changes were in store for the people of Aceh.*

**I****N MY FIRST VISIT TO THE CAPITAL CITY, BANDA ACEH,** three weeks after the tsunami, I entered a landscape of eerie anomalies. Huge ships lay stranded miles inland from the coast. Lone two- or three-story houses stood watch over vast stretches of flattened, coastal housing complexes, where a single Caterpillar and dump truck began the excruciating process to sift and move the rubble. In the retail center of the city, an elephant with its mahout labored to clear pieces of collapsed walls, and men scavenged with small carts to collect scrap metal. Through areas of destruction, people staked small Indonesian flags over indistinguishable piles to mark claims to their property, and erected signs threatening death to looters. Families forlornly returned to the rubble of their houses seeking any sign of the remains of lost loved ones, while small teams of volunteers carried black body bags of newly discovered remains. Bright yellow tents filled open spaces

surrounding public buildings, most notably the Grand Mosque, which now sheltered hundreds of families and relief volunteers.

Within this seemingly hopeless city, within a devastated province, people had begun to put their lives back together. I was invited to stay in the home of a lecturer at the Islamic university whose institution I was visiting. Each day family and friends visited to retell their harrowing stories of escape from the tsunami, or to provide information about others who had not. Everyone I met at this home and the university had experienced a loss, some of their spouses and children. Despite their obvious expressions of grief, I was struck by the resiliency of those I came to know. People commonly described themselves as submitting to destiny, to spiritual forces beyond their control and to the will of God. This submission to a religious explanation appeared to provide a necessary rationale, a degree of

*Rising conservative influence across all major religions worldwide has pushed secular law to narrow the domain of privacy, blurring the divide between religious and secular spheres.*

reassurance, and individual as well as collective comfort that enabled them to cope with their loss.

Some of the old rituals of life returned as well. In the morning men gathered again at coffee shops, friends sitting together around tables sipping glasses of coffee, eating snacks, telling stories and exchanging gossip, word-play and joking amongst themselves. One is immediately struck by the diversity of faces in Banda Aceh's best-known coffee shop, reflecting centuries of interaction with populations from India, Turkey and the Arab world. Despite its strong sense of political, cultural and religious identity, or perhaps because of it, Aceh has welcomed commercial exchange and generally been receptive to outsiders who have settled there. Even the ethnic Chinese population, often a target of recrimination during times of upheaval in many parts of Indonesia, in Banda Aceh was more secure. They in turn demonstrated their loyalty to Aceh by investing in the rebuilding of Banda Aceh following the tsunami. This is not to overly idealize inter-ethnic relations. Rightly or wrongly, Acehnese merchants suspected their Chinese counterparts of setting fire to their own stores following the tsunami to collect insurance money, suggesting they would not engage in such unethical practices themselves.

### **Defining Shariah**

Concerns over proper social behavior seem close to the surface in Aceh, and they are tied to the ongoing process of defining Muslim values in response to change. The local press carried stories of officials in urban areas of Aceh denouncing Valentine's Day. Their stated target of concern was excessive, inappropriate celebration by boys and girls who viewed this Western holiday as an opportunity to violate the accepted boundaries of interaction. My Acehnese friends seemed surprised to learn that it had a far more innocent reputation in the United States.

Of far greater consequence to most Acehnese is the expanding space of Islamic law or Shariah. A pre-tsunami offering from Jakarta to enhance the substance of Acehnese autonomy in lieu of a more favorable sharing of revenues with the region, Shariah was a concept in search of codification. Legislative committees, Islamic scholars, and local officials have since been weighing in to broaden or narrow the reach of Shariah. Lecturers at the two leading tertiary educational institutions, including Ar-Raniry State Institute of Islamic Studies, view their role as helping legislators to achieve a legal code that blends Shariah with Acehnese values and modern sensibilities. Just how far this goes beyond family law, and how fast, remains to be seen, but already one sees signs of enforcement.

What is Shariah in Aceh? Though it may become a codified, comprehensive set of laws, currently its most visible characteristic is concern with defining and regulating morality. While I was riding with a friend on the coast road heading south from Banda Aceh, he

pointed out a parked car and explained this area was historically a popular lover's lane. He noted that the Shariah police patrol this area, and will ask a male and female couple seen alone in a parked car to prove they are married or related. Elsewhere Shariah police have been known to enforce socially proper dress for women, including the wearing of headscarves in public. As intrusive as this seemed to me, it was also not altogether strange. Rising conservative influence across all major religions worldwide has pushed secular law to narrow the domain of privacy, blurring the divide between religious and secular spheres.

What is my dominant image in Aceh? It is of Acehnese celebrating the return of life toward normality: streams of students walking on the streets near campus; tents being replaced by more permanent housing; shops, open-air markets and cafes flourishing again. It is of traffic jams returning to the main thoroughfares of Banda Aceh, and of people traveling freely again on roads throughout the region. It is of the first harvest of rice in fields destroyed in December 2004, and people remarrying and starting new families. While frustration with the slow pace of reconstruction continues, and the euphoria of outside assistance has been tempered by the realities of well-meaning but haphazard responses reflected in some shoddy housing projects, life is improving.

### **After 30 years, peace returns**

The greatest improvement to life in Aceh is the return of peace after 30 years of fighting between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the central government. The former vice-rector at Ar-Raniry State Institute for Islamic Studies drove me from Banda Aceh to Malahayati Harbor northeast of the city, describing his personal brushes with disaster along this main thoroughfare. Close as it was to the capital city, this stretch of road was a GAM stronghold, and anyone traveling by car risked being stopped at gunpoint and interrogated about his stance in the conflict. Even well-equipped Indonesian Army troops suffered casualties when their passing troop transport trucks brushed low-hanging tree branches booby-trapped to detonate on contact. Now we could make this drive at a leisurely pace without concern that sunset was fast approaching.

Horrendous as it was, the tsunami may have been the price of peace for Aceh. The losses GAM suffered in the tsunami weakened its position militarily and almost immediately led it to declare a unilateral ceasefire. Though the Indonesian Army continued to pursue GAM, its focus was forced to shift to tsunami relief as the eyes of the world were fixed on the region. The new administration in Jakarta, led by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Vice-President Jusuf Kalla, pursued peace talks with GAM political leadership in Helsinki, Finland, that resulted in an agreement in August 2005 to end hostilities, substantially improve Aceh's share of oil and natural gas revenues from the region, and create a process that

could enable GAM to achieve representation in provincial elections. All of this needed to be ratified by the People's Legislative Assembly (DPR) in Jakarta to take effect, and required this body to amend the Indonesian Constitution to allow creating a political party that operated only in Aceh, not nationally. Though the DPR had failed to deliver a definitive solution to this electoral problem, GAM responded pragmatically by allowing its members to run for office in any political party in Aceh for upcoming elections.

### Challenges for the future

Looking ahead, Aceh faces three major hurdles. The physical recovery led by the Agency for Reconstruction and Reconciliation will take a decade or more. Given the scale of the effort, the number of international and national agencies and organizations involved, and the large amount of money, the chorus of criticism from Acehese and watchdog groups will mount. Expectations inevitably exceed capacity to deliver, failures get magnified, and quality falls short in the complex environment of humanitarian assistance. The July 2006 report issued by the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition concludes as much. Still, in an environment that emphasizes transparency, the agency is learning and improving its oversight.

Second, Aceh's newly reaffirmed special autonomous relationship with the Indonesian central government needs to achieve a level of trust that has existed only for fleeting periods from 1945 to the present. Continued harmonious relations will require an equitable distribution of oil and natural gas revenues. It also will require attaining a sense in Aceh that true autonomy has been achieved, and in Jakarta that Aceh is not undermining national unity.

Finally, the creation of Shariah is uncharted territory, and even within Aceh — the front porch to Mecca — a wide spectrum of fundamentalist to modernist forces will vie for influence. Several faculty from Ar-Raniry State Institute of Islamic Studies are conducting research at the East-West Center on issues related to Islamic banking, Islamic business contract law and marital law that they hope will enable them to bring reason, moderation and humanitarian concerns to the process. They are convinced that in Aceh it is possible to create a society firmly rooted in Islamic law, but reflecting Acehese values and modernity. Historically Islam in Aceh has evidenced strong self-confidence, and does not appear to have been affected by the wave of fundamentalist, Wahabist influence that has left its mark worldwide in the past two decades. Now Aceh is open to outside influence as never before, including Wahabist groups from Jakarta. How the shaping of Shariah proceeds in Aceh will be an indicator of Aceh's ability to resist these influences.

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