



Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs

Stegmann, Christian (2010),
Review: Edward Aspinall: Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh,
Indonesia, in:
Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs, 29, 3, 148-151.
ISSN: 1868-4882 (online), ISSN: 1868-1034 (print)

The online version of this article can be found at:
<www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org>

Published by
GIGA German Institute of Global and Area Studies, Institute of Asian Studies and
Hamburg University Press.

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is an Open Access publication.
It may be read, copied and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the
Creative Commons Attribution-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.

To subscribe to the print edition: <ias@giga-hamburg.de>
For an e-mail alert please register at: <www.CurrentSoutheastAsianAffairs.org>

The *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* is part of the GIGA Journal Family which
includes: Africa Spectrum • Journal of Current Chinese Affairs • Journal of Current
Southeast Asian Affairs • Journal of Politics in Latin America •
<www.giga-journal-family.org>



Aspinall, Edward (2009), *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia*, Stanford/Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press

ISBN 978-0-8047-6045-4, 288 pages

Edward Aspinall, an associate professor of Indonesian politics at the Australian National University, has released a new book on the separatist rebellion in Aceh.

At the latest since the tsunami disaster on Boxing Day 2004, Aceh and the independence struggle of the GAM (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*; Free Aceh Movement) have gained global attention. The decades-long conflict in the northernmost Indonesian province dates back to the nineteenth century when the Acehnese fought against Dutch colonial forces. After 30 years of war, Aceh was incorporated into the Netherlands East Indies. During the Indonesian struggle for independence, Aceh's political leaders supported the nationalist movement and expected, in turn, concessions in the form of self-determination and autonomy, which were denied. In the 1950s many Acehnese joined an Islamist movement – the *Darul Islam*. This rebellion officially ended in 1959 and the province received a special territory status. In the mid-1970s the GAM emerged. The GAM fought for independence and, at least at the beginning, for the implementation of *shari'a* (Islamic law). This conflict, the main focus of Aspinall's book, lasted until the end of 2004.

Islam and Nation deals with three central themes: the origins of Acehnese nationalism, its relation to Islam, and the eventual decline of this nationalism as well as of the secessionist movement (p.6). The book also stresses and analyses the context in which the GAM operated. The organisation's identity is framed by three aspects – namely the institutional, international, and social contexts, contexts that are usually vital to the cropping up of nationalism. These aspects shaped and confined the range of choices available to GAM members (p.7).

Aspinall proceeds chronologically from the nineteenth century until the 2005 signing of the Helsinki Peace Agreement. *Islam and Nation* aims to present a historical overview of the Aceh conflict and to situate the discussion in comparative and theoretical debates about nationalism, Islam, and internal conflict (p.15).

Classic studies dealing with Aceh – and the GAM in particular – usually rely on three factors to explain the rebellion: the political centralisation during the New Order era, the exploitation of natural resources, and state violence. But, according to Aspinall, grievance-based approaches do not offer a sufficient explanation. Besides grievances, “equally important was a collective action frame justifying revolt, and the presence of nationalist political entrepreneurs willing to explain and promote the frame” (p.51). Grievances

did not propel the movement; the GAM simply used them to underpin their independence propaganda. The GAM “picked out, explained, interpreted, and even created grievances in a new way” (p.83), thus contributing to the evolution of Acehese nationalism.

According to Aspinall, “there is little evidence of a widely shared, conscious Acehese identity” existing before the twentieth century (p.20). The horizontal identification that counted was Islamic (p.21). The impact of colonialism “brought into being a new form of consciousness whereby people imagined themselves also connected as part of a distinct group” (p.47). Thus, during the colonial period, a distinct Acehese identity emerged. This period “saw not merely transformation from pre-modern and pre-national concepts of identity to modern and national ones, but also a complex inter-meshing of three distinct frameworks” (p.20) – namely, Acehese, Indonesian and Islamic. Both the Indonesian and Acehese identities were based on Islam. After Indonesian independence, an awareness of Acehese difference and identity rose. The GAM, as a movement with a mainly rural background, emphasised traditional Acehese values such as loyalty, honour and masculinity and stressed the importance of familial and blood bonds, demonstrating their ethno-nationalist perception. The GAM succeeded in connecting nationalist ideas with Islamic conceptions of martyrdom, thus gaining popular support for their ideas and their violent approach (p.97f).

According to Aspinall, Acehese nationalism was not always consistent (p.11). The *Darul Islam* rebels were fighting for an Islamic state as well as the corresponding implementation of *shari’a*. This was the basis for the GAM that, from the 1970s to the 1990s, espoused formal goals in the tradition of the former Islamic rebellion of *Darul Islam* and defined itself as part of a worldwide struggle between Islam and the West. However, after Suharto’s fall in 1998 and the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001, the GAM began to eschew any religious goals and emphasised instead achieving secular political goals, such as independence, demilitarisation, and democracy. This marked a dramatic break with Acehese tradition and the GAM’s own beginnings. Whereas nationalism and Islam were still combined at the grassroots level of GAM activism (p.194), at the leadership level, a transition from Islamism to secular nationalism occurred. Two important external factors contributed to this development: On the one hand, the GAM feared losing Western support by interjecting Islam into their political rhetoric. On the other hand, the GAM considered the Indonesian government’s decision to allow Aceh to implement *shari’a* in 2001 an attempt to mitigate Aceh’s pro-independence movement, a tactic used by Jakarta to deceive the *’ulama* (Muslim scholars) and the Acehese people.

At the civil-society level, the concerns of the students who protested in Aceh from 1998 until 2000 were in line with those of other Indonesian activists. The new protesters were part of Indonesia's urban cosmopolitan culture, in contrast to the GAM, which mainly relied on rural networks. Initially, the students were not interested in independence, but in political reform and in bringing human rights abusers to justice (p.123), namely military generals and soldiers who had violated human rights during the DOM (*Daerah Operasi Militer*; Military Operational Area) period, which lasted from 1990 until 1998. Instead of emphasising the history of pre-colonial Aceh, the stolen sovereignty by the Dutch, and the handing over of Aceh to the Javanese, the starting point for this group's cultural history was Aceh's experience as part of the Republic of Indonesia (p.134). These new protesters were not highly influenced by the GAM's ethno-nationalism. The cause of this new civic nationalism was largely the repression of the DOM period (p.129).

Aspinall's findings show that Acehnese nationalism was not historically inevitable, but can be explained through four aspects: path dependencies, institutionalisation of identity, international contexts, and sustaining factors. The nationalist movement's roots date back to events of the Indonesian independence war as well as the defeat of the *Darul Islam* rebellion, both of which laid the groundwork for "localization and territorialization of identity" (p.249). The special territory status given to Aceh by the central government after the breakdown of *Darul Islam* institutionalised a unique Acehnese identity. Consequently, the Acehnese – and particularly the GAM's – view of ethno-nationalism could be considered "a child of the Indonesian state", especially "in its most authoritarian guise during the New Order years" (p.250). Hasan di Tiro's stay in the United States contributed a new set of ideas to the rebellion's agenda, such as sovereignty and self-determination. It also accounted for the movement's shift from Islamism to nationalism. Factors that helped the movement survive were the military violence perpetrated by the state and a shadow economy through which the rebels could fund themselves (p.250). The shift from Islamism to nationalism was therefore a continuous process rather than a sudden event. In the long run, the concurrence of factors altered the movement's ideological, religious basis.

The nationalist idea did not all of a sudden settle into the Acehnese consciousness; rather, it emerged primarily in the course of the Aceh-wide mobilisation (p.149). Today, Acehnese nationalism has declined, but the Acehnese awareness still exists: "[O]nce an identity has become fixed in the modern age it will rarely disappear, especially if reinforced by experiences of mass violence" (p.252).

Aspinall's work is clearly structured and well written. Each chapter begins with a short introduction that is subsequently elucidated and elaborated upon. At the end of each chapter, the author summarises his main points and connects them to the chapters that follow. He combines political theory with an intelligible narrative, which makes the book accessible to a wide readership. To illuminate his results, he does not simply report the facts and findings, but also relies on numerous interviews with contemporary witnesses, which sets his book apart from other literature on Aceh.

However, it seems Aspinall gets bogged down in his narrative and case studies; very often he proposes a thesis, only to relativise it in the course of the text. Therefore the reading flow is sometimes impeded. Moreover, in Chapter 6, he tackles the question of whether GAM combatants from 1985 to 2005 were freedom fighters or just a criminal gang. Aspinall states in the conclusion of that chapter that the GAM "should not be categorized as either an ideological rebellion or a criminalized one" (p.191). The author finally concludes that the GAM was both, in other words a "political bandit" (p.191). But he neither makes clear what this matter contributes to the discussion about Islam and nationalism nor does he succeed in linking this chapter to his key questions.

Altogether, though, Aspinall's book is not just very helpful for Aceh and Indonesia specialists, but will also be highly useful for scholars interested in the analysis of separatism, ethnic conflict, nationalism, and the politicisation and de-politicisation of Islam in general. *Islam and Nation* will most likely become a benchmark and will contribute to the broader debate about nationalism.

Christian Stegmann

- Christian Stegmann completed his bachelor's degree in Asian Studies at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn, where he is currently pursuing a master's degree in Southeast Asian Studies.
<stegimaster@gmx.de>