

**Edward Aspinall. *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009. 288 pp.**

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Edward Aspinall has succeeded in doing two things with this book: he provides a fine-grained study about Aceh and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) and he situates Acehnese nationalism within the broader theories on nationalism, secession, and civil wars. He uses Aceh as a case study in testing these theories, but goes well beyond that. He gives us an intimate and careful look at Acehnese society, regarding both its daily life and practice, as well as the bigger picture of how a population responded over several decades to Indonesian rule.

This book is a highly readable, dynamic, and lucid exposition about the ideas and activities of GAM. Based on a range of interviews with protagonists from all levels of GAM, both within Aceh and without, Aspinall traces how GAM developed as an organization over a period of some thirty years. Moreover, the reader of *Islam and Nation* will gain a good understanding of Acehnese society: the kinship networks, gender roles, life in religious boarding schools (the *dayah*), and the *dayah*'s place in disseminating ideas and cementing political and social relationships. Descriptions of the changing demographic profile of Acehnese society—for example, the rise of a new generation of students and intellectuals in the late 1990s, their critique of the Indonesian state, and their response to the ideology and appeal of GAM—are a particularly interesting feature of this book. Aspinall's earlier work on the anti-Suharto student movement in Indonesia stands him in good stead to analyze how the pro-democracy wave affected Acehnese youth.<sup>1</sup>

Early on, Aspinall states that, in examining Acehnese nationalism, he focused on the roles of agency and context. For Aspinall, nationalism, and, in turn, secessionism, are contingent upon contexts—the institutional, international, and social contexts. He shows in this book how GAM's ideology and activities developed alongside the different circumstances in which it found itself over time. Aspinall charts how GAM deployed religion in the early days, when it reached out, not only to intellectuals studying in Acehnese and North Sumatran institutions, but also to former Darul Islam fighters. This emphasis on Islam dissipated in later years.

At the same time, Aspinall is concerned with the question of agency, that is, whether the decisions of political actors such as GAM founder Hasan Di Tiro, Malik Mahmud, Zaini Abdullah, and other GAM leaders mattered in charting a path for their nationalist cause. Aspinall shows that the agency of GAM leaders matters, in that Di Tiro's formulation of Acehnese nationalism, which drew upon history and on his ancestry, fashioned a new nationalism in which Islam did not play a necessarily prominent part.

Aspinall's work analyzes why secessionist movements come to the fore. He argues that grievance alone—for example, Acehnese discontent based on economic exclusion

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Aspinall, *Opposing Suharto: Compromise, Resistance, and Regime Change in Indonesia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

and marginalization—is insufficient to explain secessionism, particularly when the root of the grievance is an experience commonly shared across the Indonesian archipelago. Rather, Hasan di Tiro and GAM managed to select, interpret, and transform a multitude of grievances, as well as to create new ones. This ability, taken together with the idea they created and promoted that Aceh had a special historical status and mission, made Aceh Merdeka’s message very potent, indeed, to the people of Aceh.

The Free Aceh Movement was a thoroughly modern phenomenon, albeit its historical foundations were made on the basis of the pre-modern sultanate that had existed in Aceh. Aspinall provides us with an historical account of GAM’s founding, in the context of Acehese nationalism and fresh memories in Aceh, particularly among older men of the Darul Islam rebellion. Di Tiro developed his ideas while in exile. He based his ideas on a historical conception of Aceh’s sovereignty as one reaching as far back as a sultanate of the seventeenth century, by which historical authority the subsequent Dutch and Indonesian regimes were illegal. However, di Tiro was also a worldly character who had spent many years in the United States and made his nationalist appeals in a firmly internationalist framework and based them on the concept of state sovereignty.

Aspinall traces the initial, humble beginnings of GAM to the period 1978–79, when it was for some, as he writes, little more than “a rumor in the hills” (p. 83). GAM’s return to insurgency from 1989 until 1998 was, as he argued, a product of a nationalist movement that looked simultaneously abroad (to places such as Malaysia and Libya, where it succeeded in gaining more recruits, training support, and weapons) and close by (by working on local kinship and other networks in rural areas to win popular support and attract recruits). In working locally, GAM succeeded in gaining a strong, organic foothold in Aceh that enabled it to survive the military onslaught during the repressive DOM (Daerah Operasi Militer, Military Operations Zone) period, from 1990–98.

After the fall of Suharto, tens of thousands of Acehese mobilized in 1998–99 to demand a referendum, many of them young Acehese. In this period, the state suffered a serious crisis of legitimacy, all regions of Indonesia were affected by a wave of democratization, and GAM began a new insurgency. Both random and not-so-random acts of violence, committed by both military agents and GAM, occurred in many parts of Aceh, such as school burnings and the killing of so-called informers. At this time GAM’s membership was growing, and the International Crisis group estimated its membership as between 15,000–27,000 men. GAM gained a certain respect for carrying out some quasi-state functions without relying on traditional or ongoing infrastructure or facilities. However, a renewed state military operation in 2003 halted GAM’s period of growth. Unlike during GAM’s 1989–98 insurgency, in 2003 many GAM soldiers were relatively new, recruited from the post-Suharto upsurge. They found the military offensive difficult to counteract. So while the commonly held view is that the tragic 2004 Boxing Day tsunami was the prime factor motivating both sides to accept the peace agreement, Aspinall traces this development to the military setbacks GAM suffered during Indonesia’s military offensive.

With Aceh’s image as a devoutly Muslim region, it is Islam that is often blamed for—or seen as a factor in—motivating secessionism. Yet Aspinall shows that Islam possibly delayed the growth of Acehese nationalism. Through shared Islamic ideals,

Aceh could be firmly wedded to the Indonesian nation. The central government could undermine the Acehese insurgency by promising concessions related to Islamic practice. This explains the central government's offers to allow the implementation of *sharia* law, offers intended to win over the Acehese, and it in turn explains GAM's suspicions of such offers. GAM saw the risks posed by making Islam a central plank of its cause. Those concerns were confirmed when, after September 11, 2001, the United States began its "war on terror" against Islamic insurgent groups and invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq. Globally, there was less support for Muslims demanding self-rule. For this reason, GAM, which had been trying to internationalize its struggle for a sovereign state, was persuaded to downplay the role of Islam in its struggle.

The Free Aceh Movement's 2005 decision to give up the struggle for independence, a cornerstone of its program since the late 1970s, surprised many international observers, as well as GAM followers inside Aceh. GAM's leaders in exile in Sweden had to work very hard to convince GAM's Aceh-based field commanders of the need to accept the August 2005 Helsinki peace agreement. Aceh's struggle was finally internationalized, but, in turn, it was "tamed" (p. 229) on the international stage when no country was prepared to countenance the establishment of an Aceh politically separate from Indonesia.

Those who have attempted to understand the nature of GAM and its charismatic leader, Hasan di Tiro, will be very well-served by this book. There is heavy focus on GAM, but, more broadly, the book examines Acehese nationalism and how GAM is a manifestation of that cause.

This book steers clear of the extremes that hamper many works about GAM—some works paint GAM as little more than a coercive terroristic movement motivated by its own interests, or laud GAM's members as heroes driven to armed struggle by brutal Indonesian rule. Aspinall's work avoids those caricatures. His political-history approach enables him to explain the reasons for GAM's actions and outlook in different time periods. As a skillful writer, with solid research behind him, he succeeds in presenting a historically grounded and multifaceted picture of GAM. This book is a thought-provoking and, at the same time, easy to read analysis of Acehese society and the conditions that gave birth to GAM.

Aspinall sketches out how, after Helsinki, GAM reinvented itself as a patronage machine. It is adapting itself into the Indonesian political landscape. Former GAM leaders and troops have become successful business figures, winning contracts in procurement and construction projects. While accepting an autonomy deal might have been unpalatable to GAM leaders and commanders under Suharto's authoritarian and centralist state, Aspinall argues that, in a democratizing Indonesia, it was possible for GAM leaders to convince their followers that this opportunity was different.

If secessionism is a highly contingent phenomenon, it is impossible to say that serious political discontent, even secessionist movements, could never again arise in Aceh. Aspinall's work is quite an achievement, and will prepare readers well for whatever happens next.