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# PEDULI ACEH

James T. Siegel

Saiful Mahdi, in his insightful piece that we publish alongside this one, speaks of "Jakarta," meaning the Indonesian government and, in particular, its military. He gives us a picture of an implacable campaign to subjugate Aceh that only modifies its tactics in the face of a completely unanticipated and almost unimaginable catastrophe. Saiful Mahdi describes Indonesian marines teaching school with rifles strapped across their shoulders, fearing, apparently, the very children they feel worth saving, presumably shaping the futures of these students while at the same time suspecting that their future behavior may well mean trouble for soldiers stationed in the region. Aceh causes "Jakarta" trouble even when Aceh is on its knees.

"The earthquake and tsunami that struck Aceh on December 26, 2004 made Aceh well known," Saiful remarks. And, indeed, this is very much the case. His next sentence is: "A great contrast with the time just before the catastrophe." Before this event, Aceh was an obscure entity internationally. The great wave of water that knocked down its cities broke through the wall that cordoned it off. "Opened to the elements," one says, and now one has to include political forces with the elemental. The army's reaction to that situation is to seek publicity, says Mahdi.

It is perhaps interesting, then, to substitute for "Jakarta," "Indonesia," because Aceh received little enough attention inside Indonesia before the tsunami. The reporting of the Acehnese political conflict in the Indonesian press was, it has been noted, designed to reassure rather than to alert. One might have expected Aceh to attract the support of Islamic groups, but for various reasons this has never materialized. The hopes of many Acehnese, mainly from the middle class, for "civil society" to respond to the atrocities committed by the military and thus to avoid reliance on the GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, Free Aceh Movement) as the only vehicle for opposition has also proved futile up until this point. No political party supported the separation of Aceh from Indonesia.

The atrocities of the military are well known in Indonesia; they are almost too well known. Which is to say that the army is feared and the reaction to its deeds is generally silence. Not, certainly and fortunately, by all. But even where opposition to the army is known and protests against its tactics are mounted, it has not led to general support for

Aceh. The reasons are complex, and I will not touch on them here, having attempted to do so elsewhere.<sup>1</sup> It is thus necessary to understand how the news of the earthquake and tsunami was received inside Indonesia outside Aceh. This is a difficult task precisely because Aceh received so much attention. I do not pretend here to do more than sketch an outline suggesting how it might be carried out.

There was no one who spoke for Aceh at the time of the disaster. The governor of the province, Abdullah Putih, an Acehnese himself, married to a television celebrity, was on trial in Jakarta for corruption. He asked permission to return to the province in its hour of need and was refused. He then asked his judges' permission to pray for the province, thereby displaying his utter loyalty to the government; he would only pray to God if the government allowed it. The court permitted him to lead a prayer only after the court session was over. Eventually the central government itself took over the administration of the province. Among the *ulama* there was also no one who had the capacity to speak on behalf of the people of Aceh. After the death of Daud Beureuëh, the important *ulama* had joined Golkar, thus losing the confidence of most Acehnese. The GAM itself had influence among the peasantry, but lacked the means to get its voice heard outside of Aceh. It is respected by many in Aceh for its opposition, but also mistrusted for its own violence and corruption, which, while not at all on the scale of the government's stupendous efforts, are enough to arouse the doubts of many, particularly the middle class. Furthermore, this was the first democratic natural catastrophe that I know of to have struck Indonesia. Till now, floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes have devastated only the lower classes. Reports show that this time things were different. The *Jawa Pos*, for instance, published stories about the high officials, including military and police officials, who were lost. This time it was not possible for those who assert that they represent "the people" to claim that they were able to do so because they stood above them.

I can only speak about the reception of the news in East Java, where I was living for the month following the tsunami. There, throughout the province, one could not avoid people, most of them young, from various organizations, collecting for relief. They held out containers in which to put one's contributions. Often enough, pasted onto these containers was a handwritten sign, "Peduli Aceh," "Pay Attention to Aceh." As though in acknowledgment that Aceh had received little attention previously. And as though it might well be possible that it would sink back into obscurity again. But, as Saiful Mahdi points out, now Aceh was in the world's view. And that being the case, Indonesians too must look. The papers and television were filled with images of destruction and suffering from that remote province.

But what was meant by the term "Aceh" in the absence of a spokesman to help give it an identity? "Aceh," if it had a single meaning, meant the target of an enormous, unexpected, and previously unknown destruction from which no one present was exempt by virtue of who they were. Once again, it was a democratic catastrophe. Destruction was blind to its victims. Thus the tsunami refracted the experience of the Acehnese who, simply going about their daily business, regardless of their identities, have been the victims of extortion, rape, and murder and have been powerless to

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<sup>1</sup> See James T. Siegel, "The Idea of Indonesia Continues," *Archipel* 64 (June 2002); and also "Possessed," in *The Rope of God*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

respond. Before, to identify with Acehese victims meant to oppose the army. Now however, such identification was possible. The political context had been repainted in natural colors.

Pictures of the total destruction of Meulaboh (its prolonged isolation lasted for several days, as it did in Calang and other places on the west coast) and of the acres and acres of mere rubble that had once been Banda Aceh show ruins created by a destructive force that was provoked by no cause having to do with the lives of its inhabitants. The response to this, for some, was a call for "*introspeksi*," "introspection." In one version, somehow, it seemed people deserved this terrible blow because they were lax in praying. There were also attempts to make the conflict override the division between the government and Acehese. Thus the *Jawa Pos* ran a story of a prisoner, a member of the GAM, who escaped when the jail was broken open but then returned, understanding that the catastrophe overrode political differences. These responses, however, were by no means typical; most reactions were more direct and spontaneous, triggered by the thought that (now) nothing distinguishes me from them. Anyone could be a victim. Stories of the separation of families, the making of orphans, the unexpected deaths of those near to one, are stories of life in general, compressed and speeded up. The *Jawa Pos* correspondent himself was a victim. He was taking his bath when the tsunami struck. It was the last he saw of his family. He found himself in the water, floating to the surface, violently struck by debris, sinking again, struck again. He lost consciousness, then woke to find himself in a tree. Another man, also in the tree, said to him that, as the correspondent was naked, he would give him his trousers. Finally able to descend, the reporter eventually found refuge. After being lost to the world for several days, he was discovered by the *Jawa Pos* and, against his initial wishes, brought back to Java for the medical treatment he badly needed. This story of having lost everything and everyone close, of being lost to the world, of not fully regaining oneself, physically and, apparently, mentally as well, is different from other such stories only in the particular circumstances.

The correspondent's story is also one that involves spontaneous cooperation and mutual helpfulness and, in the gesture of offering trousers to cover nakedness, an ingrained civility. The story, like practically all the others, is incredible, and this is a problem. On the one hand, one thinks *it could have been me* since the tsunami was indiscriminate in its victims. On the other hand, a story of this kind is precisely incredible, which means it is difficult to hold on to that empathetic thought for long. In East Java, one gave, one wanted, the victims to recover and thus no longer require one's attention.

Giving was in the idiom of the humanitarian. One gives to others just like us. We could be them. The "them" in this formulation had been identified for many years as the victims of the Indonesian army; then, following this catastrophe, "Acehnese" became victims of a natural force. Humanitarianism replaced politics; "they" became "like us," rather than those who suffer in a political conflict. "*Peduli Aceh*," "*Pay Attention to Aceh*," obscures its predicate at the moment it draws attention to it. Better to think of the unimaginable tsunami, a foreign force with a foreign name, capable of affecting anyone, than of the Indonesian power that murders fellow countrymen and has done so for decades, scarcely pausing in the face of natural wrath, raging on still today.