

Matthew N. Davies. *Indonesia's War over Aceh, Last Stand on Mecca's Porch.* London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2006. 290 pages.

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Matthew Davies's book offers a rare insight into Indonesian military ideas regarding the three decades of conflict in Aceh, as well as its chosen strategies to defeat the Acehnese resistance. In an earlier study, Kirsten Schulze¹ examined the war in Aceh based on the material and statements produced by the Indonesian military (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, or TNI), but unlike Schulze, Davies is far less positive about the TNI's mission and methods in Aceh. Davies analyses the information and disinformation spread by the military and police, brings up discrepancies, and points out what has motivated the spread of falsified information. The picture that emerges is not a pleasant one. Rather, it is an illustration of the inhumanity of war and cold-blooded calculations of the military commanders who ignore the suffering of civilians caught between the fighting parties. This book does not cover the developments after the peace agreement was signed in Helsinki in August 2005 by the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM). It nevertheless contains important information for those participating in the post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation efforts who need to understand fully the nature of warfare in Aceh. Similarly, important information is provided for those who try to make sense of the difficulties of current reform processes in Indonesia, including military reform.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first chapter gives general information on the Acehnese war, outlining the most commonly presented reasons for one of the world's longest conflicts. For example, Aceh's uneasy relationship with Indonesia's nationalist self-image and outsiders' greedy exploitation of Aceh's natural wealth, as well as the environmental disasters and deepening poverty of the province's civilian population, are all brought up and explored.

Chapter Two discusses an important but, unfortunately, rarely acknowledged divide-and-rule game in Aceh that occurs through the manipulation of administrative boundaries and statistics. The number of Aceh's district administrations rose from 133 in the late 1980s to 231 in 2004. The creation of new administrative units has been particularly frequent since 1998. Davies shows convincingly how the motivation behind the divisions (to create new units) has had nothing to do with providing better administrative services for a growing population. Instead, the motivation has been to allow the corrupt government structure to milk more money out of the state budget. Moreover, the creation of new units has assisted the military in tightening its grip on Aceh's civilian leaders and population as the military's territorial structure grows with the civilian administration. A particularly important point is that the creation of new administrative units has been incongruent with the geographic distribution of the population. This has given political over-representation to the scarcely populated

¹ Kirsten E. Schulze: "Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency: Strategy and the Aceh Conflict, October 1976–May 2004," in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), pp. 225–71. [A review of *Verandah of Violence* is forthcoming in *Indonesia*.—Ed.]

southern and central parts of Aceh. When this information is matched with the conflict data, as Davies does, it becomes clear that the GAM's populous strongholds have been systematically pushed toward the political margin, while the central and southern parts of Aceh that are ruled by the military and militia groups have been given disproportionate shares of political power and economic benefits. My own observations on post-conflict Aceh reveal that the splitting of administrative units is still continuing. As the post-tsunami and post-conflict assistance monies and government development funds are often allocated according to the number of administrative units, it is clear that such divisions form a serious challenge to the new Aceh government's efforts to build a socio-economically just society.

Discrepancies and ambiguity in the government statistics about its own administration were commonplace, and similar problems were encountered by those who wished to understand the formation of Indonesian military units and operations in Aceh, as Davies explains in the third chapter. From his description, it appears as if the current Indonesian military and police forces are a result of decades of patchwork, where elements have been added without ever erasing their predecessors. The roots of both institutions are in the Dutch colonial era. Davies shows that the model for both the special anti-riot police unit (the mobile police brigade, or Brimob) and the special-operations military (Kommando Pasukan Khusus, or Kopassus) para-commando units has been the colonial-Dutch elite commandos of *Korps Maréchaussee*, thus elaborating upon a similar notion made by Henk Schulte Nordholt in his outline of a genealogy of violence in Indonesia.²

The following four chapters take a look at the Indonesian military and police operations in Aceh from various perspectives. Chapter Four examines the morale and motivation of the soldiers and police officers, followed by a chapter that explores the propagandist public information on the police and military casualties in Aceh. The next two chapters explore the darker sides of the war in Aceh: the atrocities and the role of the militia, the *Islampolitik* of warfare, as well as psychological operations and the role of terrorism in Aceh's military operations.

The book does not offer new information on the legal and illegal business activities of the TNI in Aceh, since the topic has already been carefully examined by others, most notably by Damien Kingsbury and Lesley McCulloch.³ It focuses more on other aspects of the military culture and practices, as well as the strategies used in the military operations in Aceh. In discussing the morale of the TNI soldiers, Davies brings up a sensitive and extremely important feature of the Aceh war, namely its traumatizing effects on those carrying weapons. TNI soldiers and police officers who turned their weapons against their fellow citizens in Aceh often became victims of violence themselves. A hidden aspect of Indonesia's war in Aceh has been the suicides and fratricides within the armed forces. The prevailing Indonesian military culture has prevented an open discussion of this problem. Yet, experiences in other post-conflict

² Henk Schulte Nordholt, "A Genealogy of Violence," in *Roots of Violence in Indonesia*, ed. Freek Colombijn and J. Thomas Lindblad (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2002), pp. 33–61.

³ For their recent work, see Damien Kingsbury and Lesley McCulloch, "Military Business in Aceh," in *Verandah of Violence: The Background to the Aceh Problem*, ed. Anthony Reid (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2006), pp. 199–224. [Damien Kingsbury has a book review in this issue of *Indonesia*. A review of *Verandah of Violence* is forthcoming in *Indonesia*.—Ed.]

situations tell us how important it is to break the taboo, and provide assistance programs for soldiers and ex-combatants who are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

The last three chapters discuss how Aceh's civilian population was used and abused by the military. These function as a good reminder of just how deep are the divisions that were created by the Aceh conflict. The presence of militia groups—while both the TNI and the Indonesian government systematically denied their existence in Aceh—and the participation of civilians in extrajudicial killings and other human-rights violations, as well as the exploitation of *syariah* (Islamic law) in oppressing the civilian population, are all problems that remain behind now that the guns have fallen silent. Davies provides plenty of information on these issues, but he seems to drown in the swamp of acronyms and details in his analysis. It would also have been worthwhile to set Aceh's events in their wider context. For example, the fact that TNI soldiers were first brought to trial for killing civilians in Aceh in the late 1990s under growing domestic and international pressure on the Indonesian government due to its poor human-rights record is largely ignored in the book.

Further contextualization would also have been valuable in the discussion of the implementation of *syariah* in Aceh, and the role of the military and jihadist organizations in promoting it. Davies actually states that the form of *syariah* introduced to Aceh is congruent with a "uniform Indonesian interpretation of Islam" that he considers to be orthodox as opposed to "more parochial Acehnese tradition." Such an interpretation of Aceh's current *syariah* regulations fails not only to understand the particularities of Indonesia's state-promoted Islam, but also to see Aceh's situation in the wider Muslim world. Aceh's adoption of Islamic criminal law is highly exceptional in Muslim societies, and any analysis of the implementation of *syariah* in Aceh, the actions of *syariah* police, and the reactions of the Acehnese population toward it must take this into account. My intention is not to discredit Davies's main point, though, that the military played an active role in imposing the religious law on Aceh. He could also have added that the TNI soldiers were excluded from *syariah* regulations. Davies also reveals an interesting feature of the current global war on terror by showing how the Indonesian propaganda machine made use of the Western media's and news analysts' Islamophobia and convinced many of them to believe that there were links between GAM and *Jemaah Islamiyah* ("Islamic Group" or "Islamic Community"; a militant network designated as a terrorist organization by some governments) when actually the latter had links with the country's military and counterintelligence.

For a reader like me who has little knowledge of military and intelligence jargon, the book is certainly not easy reading. To make it more accessible for a wider audience the author should have put more effort into opening up and explaining the specialist language used throughout the book. Davies's tendency to jump from one argument to another without explaining the link between the two makes the task even more difficult. There are numerous references to events in other conflict areas, particularly in East Timor, but occasionally also in Northern Ireland, without an explanation of why the comparison is necessary or relevant. From time to time, reading this book starts to resemble surfing the Internet. It seems as if the author has followed numerous intriguing links, and decided to pass them on to the reader. Unfortunately, this strategy does not function well in book form. Also, the book brings up valuable

information from sources that are not readily accessible to a wide audience, and as I mentioned before, it illustrates in many ways the sad inheritance with which the post-conflict Aceh has to deal. Given the importance of the information that this book contains, it is a pity that reading it is such a struggle.