



Strides in Aceh, Strides in Indonesia by Samantha F. Ravich

There is a joke circulating around Jakarta these days. It goes like this: Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, represented the Old Order; the next president, Suharto, named his government the New Order; post-crisis president Habibie's government had No Order; and current president Wahid's government is Out of Order. When one looks around the Indonesia, it is not difficult to understand the joke. Riots plague Jakarta; President Wahid, his cabinet, and the national parliament are too busy engaging in political machinations to focus on creating a sensible policy agenda; the economy shows few signs of resurrection; the currency lost nearly 10% of its value last week alone; and a religious battle seems to be looming in the eastern Moluccan Islands where at least 2,000 members of the radical Muslim organization, Lashkar Jihad, have made their way in recent weeks.

Yet on at least one dimension, Indonesia may be getting its act together. In the last two weeks, remarkable progress has been made in finding a way to resolve the tensions in the country's northwestern province of Aceh (pronounced AH-chay). Sitting at the northern tip of the island of Sumatra, Aceh is, in many respects, a barometer of what is to come for the Indonesia of the next decade. If the economic, political, and civil-military reforms that the country must make can succeed in Aceh, they most likely can succeed on a countrywide scale. Likewise, failure in Aceh may foreshadow the republic's doom.

On May 12, representatives of the Indonesian government and the Acehnese rebel groups signed an agreement to create an "humanitarian pause." The formal cease-fire would be a first in the 25 year long battle that has claimed more than 5,000 lives. While numerous uncertainties remain as to whether the cease-fire will be respected, the "pause" is, in the words of an old cola advertisement, one that certainly refreshes. It gives non-governmental organizations the break they need to find ways to protect civilians displaced by the decades long violence, and it gives both the government and the rebels breathing space to begin finding ways to negotiate a more permanent truce.

The establishment of such a truce will mean redressing the longstanding grievances of the people of Aceh. Such grievances can be roughly categorized as follows: more political autonomy; more economic parity; more religious freedom; and justice for the abuses suffered at the hands of the Indonesian military.

The first three categories are slowly being addressed by the Indonesian parliament through new provincial autonomy statutes that will go into effect by the beginning of 2001. As for the people of Aceh receiving justice, significant progress has been made in the last week. On May 17, a human rights tribunal convicted 24 Indonesian soldiers and one civilian of

massacring 57 villagers during an anti-rebel operation in June of 1999. The victims were students and one teacher from an Islamic boarding school in central Aceh. While the sentences of the convicted, ranging from eight years and six months to ten years, will not satisfy all, the convictions will be seen by many as a vindication and will bolster President Wahid's claims that he intends to redress the wrongs committed by his predecessors.

U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright rightfully hailed the Aceh truce as a positive occurrence and pledged U.S. humanitarian aid, in a yet undecided amount, to support the agreement. But to give the pact, and President Wahid's fragile new democracy, the best chance of survival the U.S. needs to do more. We need to raise the profile of our commitment to Indonesia's economic, political, and territorial stability. We can do this in three ways: we can increase our financial commitment well above the \$125 million pledged by the U.S. State department; we can increase our offers of assistance of lending trained personnel to support the overworked and understaffed governmental departments tasked with implementing the sweeping economic and political reforms; and we can restart U.S.-Indonesian military-to-military contact that was suspended in August last year.

The Clinton administration has resumed some contact by inviting Indonesian military observers to joint exercises in Thailand and by completing plans to host U.S.-Indonesian joint exercises in July. This is an excellent start but the relationship has to be broadened and deepened. This last suggestion will be controversial in some quarters. There are many people in both the U.S. Congress and the Clinton administration that believe the Indonesian military remains the brutal, repressive organization it was during the Suharto years. For those that hold that view, nothing short of the completion of full-scale military restructuring will suffice before dialogue can resume. Such a strategy is foolhardy. The Indonesian military has made significant strides in ending its political role, arranging to place itself under the control of the civilian-led Ministry of Defense, and withdrawing all military personnel posted in villages (a vestige of the Suharto years when the military would spy on political activities that could threaten the regime). Undoubtedly the process of reform has only begun. But it *has* begun and the U.S., as a friend of the new democratic Republic of Indonesia, should applaud these steps and lend the necessary support to assist in the creation of a professionalized corps.

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