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**Indonesia’s Eleventh Hour in Aceh** by Donald K. Emmerson

An Italian restaurant in San Francisco’s North Beach district is an unlikely place to be served dinner by an activist from Aceh – the Indonesian province whose momentum toward independence has been making headlines and rattling officials in concerned countries around the world.

But there he was, as my wife discovered during our meal when she asked the waiter where he was from. He produced a business card identifying him as an officer of the International Forum for Aceh (IFA). His card listed three electronic addresses, including one at IFA’s California headquarters in Oakland. (Nationalism in cyberspace, I thought to myself. Later, checking the Web for “Aceh,” I found 45,930 pages.)

When I asked our waiter when he thought his homeland might be free, he replied without hesitation. “Next month,” he said, meaning December 1999. That is by far the earliest date for Acehnese independence forecast by anyone whom I have heard or read on the subject since demands for a referendum on sovereignty began sweeping the province early this year.

Our cybernationalist waiter may have expected too much too soon. But the issue of independence for Aceh is urgent. It is also vital, not only to Indonesia, but potentially for Southeast Asia, Japan, and the United States as well.

Indonesia is the fourth most populous country and the largest archipelagic state. Its islands and the sometimes narrow channels between them afford but also restrict access to vessels passing between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. An estimated two-fifths of world shipping moves through the sea lanes inside or adjacent to Indonesia, including four-fifths of the oil Japan needs to keep its economy going.

Historically the most important of these maritime pathways has been the Malacca Strait. Aceh, on the northwestern end of the Indonesian island of Sumatra, overlooks the western gateway to and from this crucial waterway.

Indonesia has long been the world’s leading exporter of liquid natural gas. In recent years perhaps a third of the LNG produced in Indonesia has originated in Aceh. That stream has generated billions of dollars in export revenues annually for the central government in Jakarta to use throughout Indonesia. Hydrocarbons from Aceh have also been vital to energy-importing countries in Northeast Asia, notably Japan, and have made the province a profit leader for the Mobil Oil Corporation – a major investor in Acehnese LNG.

Its natural endowments have not proportionally benefited the Acehnese economy. Annually perhaps only five percent of what its natural resources have earned on world markets has come back to the province to be spent there. And that figure drops to less than half of one percent if we limit the calculation to spending for development, which Aceh still badly needs.

Of Aceh’s four million inhabitants, 98 percent are Muslims. None of Indonesia’s 26 provinces is more deeply Islamic. For this reason, and because no part of Indonesia is farther west, Aceh is sometimes hyperbolically called “the front porch of Mecca.”

If a referendum on independence is held in Aceh, and if the question is posed in such a way that its people can and do choose to become a sovereign country, a question mark will loom over the disposition of the new country’s resources. Countries for which the Malacca Strait is a lifeline will wonder how an independent state of Aceh will regard freedom of navigation. Depending on what sort of Islam the state espouses, nearby states with non-Muslim majorities – Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines – could worry lest their Muslims be emboldened by Aceh’s secession to follow suit and break away, or to demand the right to implement Koranic laws. Nor would multi-religious Malaysia welcome an assertively Muslim newcomer on its western flank. Already, in Kuala Lumpur, observers committed to interreligious tolerance are wondering whether they may someday find themselves uncomfortably sandwiched between two economically powerful governments with Islamist intentions: Aceh to the west and the Malaysia state of Terengganu to the east. Exacerbating this concern in oil-and-gas-rich Terengganu is the victory of the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party in the state election held there on 29 November 1999.

More alarming still in this context is the chance that Acehnese independence could set off further rifting in ethnoreligiously heterogenous Indonesia – with possibly tectonic consequences for the larger region.

Heightening these anxieties is a contrary fear that is growing in Asia, Australia, and the United States: What could happen if a referendum is not held? Will escalating conflict between Acehnese who insist on freedom and Indonesians who will not grant it also provoke a “Yugoslav” scenario, or at any rate drain the energy that Jakarta should be spending on other urgent national priorities?

One such priority is to heal an economy badly wounded by the Asian financial crisis. Another is to restabilize and further democratize a national Indonesian polity already badly shaken by earlier crises of succession and secession.

Within the past year a half, the presidency of Indonesia has changed hands twice – from Suharto to B. J. Habibie in May 1998 and in October 1999 to Abdurrahman Wahid – against a background of ethnoreligious and political clashes and sweeps that may have taken several thousand lives. These fatalities include the victims of army crackdowns in rebellious Aceh. Meanwhile, on June 7, 1999, national, provincial, and district elections revamped Indonesia’s representative institutions. Then, in a referendum on 30 August, the East Timorese did what many Acehnese would now like to do: vote themselves out of Indonesia altogether.

Having acknowledged East Timor’s right of self-determination, are Indonesians now on the verge of democratizing the rest of their country out of existence?

It was, after all, President Wahid himself who boosted the hopes of the Acehnese when he asked rhetorically, on November 4: “If we allow East Timor to go ahead with a referendum, why don’t we allow the Acehnese to do so?” To be inconsistent, he added, would be “unfair.” Since then, hundreds of thousands of Acehnese – some say more than a million – have been demanding that Wahid keep his word and let their province choose to say goodbye.

But what if he does, and Aceh exits the republic? Recently, Wahid doubted this would happen. He described pro-independence elements on his country’s many islands as “a very small minority.” But a spokesman for the Indonesian army, Major General Sudradjat, flatly disagreed: “A referendum on autonomy [inside Indonesia] is fine. But a referendum on independence – no, because it will lead to a Balkanization process. Yesterday, Timor; today, Aceh; tomorrow, Irian Jaya; and the day after tomorrow, Kalimantan.” The head of Indonesia’s consultative assembly was more succinct: “If Aceh breaks away, Indonesia will break apart.”

What is striking about Sudradjat’s remark is its implication that the people who live in Aceh, Irian Jaya, and Kalimantan are prisoners of Indonesia against their will, and that denying them the right of escape via self-determination is therefore essential to keeping Indonesia together as a single country. By this logic, and if democracy means deciding one’s own future, repressing democracy is necessary to rescue Indonesia.

I disagree. Indonesians inhabit some 6,000 islands. Few countries are more diverse. I doubt that public opinion across the archipelago is as firmly and irrevocably committed to local independence as the army seems to believe. If Wahid underestimates centrifugal sentiment, Sudradjat exaggerates it.

If a free and fair vote for or against independence were held tomorrow in Aceh, the “for” side would probably win. But the same question asked in the future under very different conditions just might yield a different result.

Those very different conditions, however, imply some choices that Jakarta must make – and very soon indeed if Indonesian leaders are to have any hope of postponing, let alone cancelling, Aceh’s rendezvous with sovereignty.

First, it is time for Indonesia to consider transforming itself from a unitary republic into a federation of autonomous but cooperating states, including Aceh. Proposals for constitutional reform are expected by August 2000, but even if they include a case for federalism, they could arrive too late. Meanwhile, pending constitutional changes, Indonesia’s newly elected parliament should revise existing laws on regional autonomy to devolve more power to the provinces, including Aceh.

Second, President Wahid’s recent promise to enlarge Aceh’s return on its resources from five to 75 percent should be implemented now. Simultaneously steps should be taken to ensure that such a huge transfer is not wasted for lack of planning and training, and to safeguard Aceh’s new windfall against misappropriation by local elites.

Third, the People’s Consultative Assembly in Jakarta should formally acknowledge the authority of Acehnese courts to implement Islamic laws in civil (non-criminal) cases – with due regard for Indonesian laws and the right of non-Muslim residents of Aceh to marry, divorce, and inherit under secular Indonesian jurisprudence.

Fourth, Jakarta should make Indonesian officers who committed atrocities in Aceh legally accountable for their deeds; transfer security functions from the Indonesian military to Acehnese units; and accelerate a phased withdrawal of non-Acehnese troops.

Fifth and finally, Wahid and his colleagues in Jakarta should deal with and cater to the mass of Acehnese who would like to resolve the present impasse peacefully – people like the activist waiter I met in North Beach. Further repression will only popularize the violent methods of the small but deadly core of the Aceh Freedom Movement.

These five reforms may not work. But if none of them is even tried, the “front porch of Mecca” could become the Chechnya of Indonesia – to the serious detriment of stability and development in the maritime heart of Southeast Asia.

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