

Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia.
By Edward Aspinall. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.
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Edward Aspinall's *Islam and Nation: Separatist Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia*, in which he takes on the daunting task of recounting the complex and fascinating history of the armed insurgency movement Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM) is an absolute winner. The study successfully blends in-depth analysis of the nature of Acehnese nationalism and ethnicity with studies of insurgency movements in other parts of the world, as well as assessing the impact of local, national and international factors on the thirty-year rebellion. The book includes many insightful accounts of the lives and belief systems of individual GAM activists and fighters, sprinkled with anecdotal material based on the author's first hand experiences in the field. The author relates, for example, compelling insights into the personality of GAM leader Hassan de Tiro (pp. 39–46 and 56–68) and vivid descriptions of the training of Acehnese guerillas in Libya (pp. 105–08). Many books “play it safe” by separating the theoretical sections from the narrative, and the main topic of their study from comparative observations (if any). In *Islam and Nation*, these facets are skillfully interwoven. Aspinall is such a confident writer that he is able to knit the various themes and foci of his work together beautifully and effortlessly. In short, this is an elegantly and expertly crafted book.

Few people are as familiar with post-New Order Acehnese politics as Aspinall. At the outset of the book he outlines the background of his interest in the region. He explains that the book has its origins in his first trip to Aceh in 1999 when he was part of a group of election monitors. He describes this trip as “a very affecting one”, amidst “an atmosphere of fear ... and a rising tide of violence” (p. ix). While it is clear that Aspinall has a personal involvement with his subject matter, he nevertheless maintains an unbiased and impartial position throughout the narrative. The success of the book is all the more striking given the difficulties of obtaining reliable data (the author conducted several hundred interviews with GAM leaders and fighters both in Aceh and overseas) and the vast complexity of the topic.

Most people with an interest in Indonesian history probably understand that the political and social dynamics of Aceh are quite different from other parts of Indonesia. On reading *Islam and Nation*

they will find many of their preconceptions about “the Acehnese” challenged, even reversed. When the Helsinki peace agreement between GAM and the government was signed in 2005, it appeared puzzling to many outsiders how quickly things had fallen into place. Most surprisingly, GAM abandoned its long held goal of independence in favour of mere autonomy from Jakarta. Very frequently the argument is made that it was the psychological impact of the devastating 26 December 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami that made the breakthrough in the dispute possible. Aspinall, however, puts the disaster into Aceh’s multifaceted historical, social and political context which together combined to create a framework for a resolution to the conflict. The author also points out that a democratic Indonesia proved to be much more receptive and accommodating to Acehnese nationalism than the authoritarian New Order.

Running through *Islam and Nation* is the issue of the relationship between Indonesian and Acehnese identity and the role of Islam in the insurgency (GAM’s origins lie in the Islamist Darul Islam movement of the 1950s). The author contends that most Acehnese had originally seen themselves as being both Acehnese and Indonesian. Acehnese identity is usually equated with Islam; hence, there is a widespread non-expert perception that the insurgency was essentially an Islamic rebellion against the state. One of the revelations of Aspinall’s book is that Islam facilitated Aceh’s bonding with the Indonesian state and actually “*delayed* separate nationalist sentiment” in the province (p. 47). In the battle over Acehnese identity, GAM had portrayed Indonesia as “a fraud: a cloak to cover up Javanese colonialism” (p. 70, one of many excellent quotes). GAM leader Hasan di Tiro saw his mission to lead the Acehnese to a “recovery of their historic personality” (p. 68), a claim based on an ideology which the book portrays as both simplistic and static (e.g., p. 77ff.), with little evidence to suggest the existence of a widely shared and conscious Acehnese identity before the twentieth century.

GAM’s eulogies of Aceh’s history and uniqueness, however, helped to trigger separatist nationalism (p. 38ff.). Moreover, Aspinall notes that by equating Indonesian identity with Javanese identity, GAM severed the bond between Aceh and “Indonesia”, which Islam had provided. Aspinall thus argues that there occurred a profound change in the *raison d’être* of the insurgency, from a struggle informed by Islamic ideology and devoted to the realization of shariyah to one “using secular arguments” and with an “ambiguous” position on shariyah (p. 217). Another trigger in the estrangement of Aceh and the

Indonesian state was the failure to make Islam the state ideology upon independence from the Netherlands, “a broken promise” in modern Acehese folklore. This is portrayed as one “grievance” in a list of betrayals perpetrated by the Indonesian state, covering human rights abuses, military oppression and the exploitation of natural resources. One might add here that the “broken promise” of a central role of Islam in state and governance is a shared “grievance” by many ideologically-minded non-Acehnese Muslims. However, whereas there is a potent bond between Islam and nationalism in Java and elsewhere, the Acehese sense of alienation was grounded in a propagandized sense of “Javanese hegemony” which then developed into regional nationalism and ethnic separatism. The shifting dynamics between ethno-nationalist and Islamic sentiments, with the former eventually overshadowing the latter, is one of many intriguing, well-argued and cogent insights that *Islam and Nation* offers.

Aspinall’s book is divided into eight chapters, each outstanding in its own right, but inextricably linked, forming a beautiful whole. The conclusion is especially compelling. In sum, *Islam and Nation* is a masterful book and a definitive account of its subject matter.