

## **External support for liberation movements in Aceh and Papua<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper investigates how external support is developed and how neighbouring countries react to the liberation movements in Aceh and Papua. Recognition by outside powers is the key success for their struggle.

In the case of separatist groups in Indonesia, external support has been sought on both the regional and international levels. *Regional* here means neighbouring countries surrounding Indonesia including ASEAN member countries and the Pacific Island countries. The term *international* embraces broader geographical areas such as the US, Australia, African, and other Asian and European countries. According to Premdas (1991: 18) the internationalisation of ethnic conflict “can yield new sources of sympathy, material resources and organisational skill.” I would separate internal and external dimensions that encourage the “internationalisation” of separatist movements. The international dimension is influenced by domestic dynamics within the Indonesian state, while external dynamics are ruled by international circumstances.

I suggest there are at least three internal factors that facilitate the development of external support, they are: military atrocities, the extraction of natural resources, and ethnicity and religion.

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Meanwhile, there are some external dimensions that encourage the efforts, such as globalisation, international democratisation, and racial and ideological bonds.

### *Internal dimensions*

#### *1. Militarism*

Militarism, especially in the third world, operates alongside global capitalism, using oppression and violence to ensure its survival. The use of military action to solve a conflict always brings to the people's mind the violent nature of the conflicts that produce human right abuses. Human rights are linked to moral and ethical values.

The New Order government was characterised by authoritarian-style leadership. The military held a central position of power and was the government's tool for dealing with antagonism between the state and the people. During the 32-year New Order regime, the Military played a major role in the country's political, security and defence affairs. During the New Order period, military atrocities were well known.

As far as separatist challenges are concerned, the central government has tried to suppress them with a heavy military approach. This is because the government does not want to allow any foreign intervention to mediate the conflict between the central government and the separatist groups. Hence, the government pursues its own means of solving the conflict. On the other hand, human rights abuses, occurring as the result of state military operations have drawn international condemnation. This generates sympathy for the oppressed people and thus prompts them to try to internationalise their cases.

#### *2. Extraction of natural resources*

Conflicts over natural resources often trigger a disharmony between the central government and the people. The friction is usually motivated by the unfair sharing of revenue where the local people receive less than they should. Some theorists refer to this situation as "(relative) deprivation" (Gurr, 1993; Smith, 1981). The hostility and mistrust becomes even more serious when outsiders become involved in the extraction process which is generally complicated by the foreigners' insensitivity towards the local culture. Other sour points added to the local people's hatred of the central government are poor governance (corruption, rent seeking), ignorance of the needs of local people, and discriminatory policies that marginalise the local people.

As some other governments have experienced, a government who cooperates with the multinational corporations may generate social and cultural conflict with the local people. The cooperation between the government and private corporations in the liberal market, aimed at the

generation of massive profits, results in the weakening of the ability of local people to control and manage their own resources.

Ross (2002) claims that natural resources play a key role in “triggering, prolonging and financing” violent conflicts. Hence, dependence on natural resources makes a state susceptible to violent conflict. Furthermore, the “natural resources” that cause the conflict are largely oil, hard-rock minerals, gold, diamonds and timber. Specifically within the mining industry, where operations usually take place in remote areas with no infrastructure and companies have little understanding about local customs and traditions, the conflict may “harbour secessionist movements” (MMSD Report, 2001).

### *3. Ethnic and Religion Distinction*

Most states in the world are multi ethnic and multi faith. Ethnicity and religion have been an important source of conflict during and after the Cold War period. However, these factors become new threats to peace and security, as post Cold War international politics is no longer dominated by ideology but identity. Hence, countries where their society is heterogenous are more fragile in peacetime if differences in ethnicity and religion are not carefully managed.

Similarities in ethnicity and religion are widely known as a source of support from kin-states. Moore (2002: 1-3) suggests that ethnicity matters in foreign policy because support from kin states can disturb diplomatic relations that lead to international crisis. This especially happens between bordering states, specifically when an ethnic or religious group is dominant or advantaged in one state, and disadvantaged in a neighbouring state. The attitude of the ethnic group, in the nation where they are more empowered is “more hostile toward the country where the group’s kin are disadvantaged or persecuted”. Support from across borders is generally mainly instrumental providing things such as money, weapons and safe places. It is unlikely that kin states offer recognition or diplomatic support to the separatist’s territorial demands (Ganguly, 2003).

In the case of secessionism in Indonesia, the argument above works. The Philippines and Thailand are two ASEAN member states that share separatist problems. The Philippines is likely not to support secessionism in Indonesia, because of its own separatist group in Mindanao. Malaysia was also concerned that the rise of Islam as a political force in Aceh could benefit the Malaysian Islamic Party and this might affect neighbouring Thailand. The Malayan Islamic Party is a fundamentalist group seeking to extend its influence to the northern part of peninsular Malaysia adjacent to Thailand (Richardson, 1999).

### ***External dimensions***

#### *1. The Self-determination principle*

There is a firm belief held by secessionist groups that they should have been independent and should not have been included within the present state. This belief is derived from several factors such as distinct racial, historical and cultural heritages. Separatist groups often exploit these factors as central grounds for secession. In fact many conflicts in the world happen because people believe that asserting their distinctiveness is the only way to secede from the state and to become independent. Gurr (1993) refers to this demand as being a “primordialist” requirement. This especially happens in multi-ethnic scenarios where the structure of the society is not well integrated, such as Indonesia.

The self-determination principle has been very powerful as the basis of separatist groups to secede from an existing political entity. However, the application of this principle has never been acceptable to political states since it threatens their notions of sovereignty and territorial integrity. As van Praag (1998: 17) suggests, the government’s denial of this principle often causes armed conflict. The principle of self-determination is embodied in several documents such as in Article I of the Charter of the UN, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The right is also recognised in international and regional instruments including the declaration of the principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1970, the Helsinki Final Act adopted by the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in 1975, the African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights of 1981 (van Praag and Serro, 1998: 16).

The principle of self-determination is seen as vague and, hence, controversial. The vagueness of this concept is due to two reasons. First, it lacks a generally accepted definition of “people”, since it is difficult to draw the line between people and ethnicity. Secondly, whether the right applies only to colonial situations, or whether peoples within existing independent states may also be eligible to use it in order to justify their will to secede (Lapidoth, 1992: 338).

## *2. Globalisation*

In the 1980s, the term 'globalisation' became commonly used to represent, especially in modern sociology, a process of “heightening of civilisational, societal, ethnic, regional and individual, self-consciousness” (Robertson 1992: 27). Today, minority groups, nationalist movements and oppressed people are demanding autonomy within or outside nation states. Efforts toward liberation are fed by global dynamics and through gathering, as Albrow (1996: 183) proposes “strength from the freely given commitment and surplus energy of ordinary people worldwide”.

One popular way for independence movements and self-determination groups to internationalise their struggles, is by utilising the internet. The use of the internet is an effective way to tell the

world about their aspirations and their “on-line struggles” and to attract global public interest. Globalisation of information has benefited the oppressed people around the world in seeking recognition and advancing their way to achieve independence. In the case of Indonesian separatist struggles, Acehnese, East Timorese and West Papuans have built solidarity efforts through cyberspace. Hebron and Stack (1999: 6) acknowledge that the information revolution has enabled social groups within states “to vocalize their interests, press their demands, mobilize their support and increase their involvement in civic affairs”.

Nevertheless, globalisation does not only bring good news, especially to the third world. Staples (2000) suggests that there is a close connection between globalisation and militarism. On the one hand, the globalists argue that globalisation promotes peace and economic development in the Third World. On the other hand, globalisation causes new threats to human security. Globalisation promotes conflict by prompting military industries to protect the investments of capitalists in the third world. The sources of conflict in the third world are in fact economic in nature, rather than rooted in religious or ethnic differences. The sale of arms, although considered an unethical business by most foreign policies, is still widely practiced. The arms producers usually sell the arms to the poor third world countries where the governments try to repress their population involved in civil war.

## *2. International democratisation*

The democratisation process that took place during the 20<sup>th</sup> century did not occur only on a national level, but also touched the sub-national level. Ethnic groups have been eagerly questioning their government’s legitimacy to govern them within the prevailing framework of power. Ethnic consciousness causes tensions within states and often creates strained relations among states in the region and beyond. Multiethnic states, especially those under authoritarian rule, fear the so-called Balkanisation of their country and the symptoms are ubiquitous in the post-cold war period.

The democratisation process, as a common phenomenon on the international stage, has been a catalyst for ethnic conflict on the national stage. The result of democratisation in Indonesia has been terrible as it intensifies the demand of secession of several ethnic groups, notably Aceh and Papua, and has placed the state in a weak position. The process of democratisation on an international level has been manipulated by local elites to cultivate ethnic sentiments to secede. International democratisation challenges the doctrine of sovereignty, which has been long treated as the cornerstone of the international system in its relations to the existence of states.

The emergence of ethnic groups as new international players has created a more conflict-prone world. States with a great deal of heterogeneity face difficulty in managing demands for secession. The international community also scrutinizes action taken by governments to deal with the

demands. Once a government takes action that is not in line with the democratisation principle, it becomes the subject of criticism. But many governments are not patient enough to respond to these demands with measures that comply with democratic principles, especially those under authoritarian regimes. As a result the action taken by governments to react to such demands can be counterproductive and, in most cases, does not solve the conflict.

### ***External support for Aceh***

Suharto's downfall and East Timor's independence were two factors which drove the Acehnese to make greater demands for autonomy, although at the present there are only a few international supporters of Aceh's independence.

Most states do not support Aceh's bid for independence, as it would affect the stability of Indonesia and Southeast Asia as a whole. Different from East Timor, Aceh was part of the newly independent country of Indonesia when the Dutch colonialists left in 1945. Not all Acehnese support independence, but a referendum is seen as the only way to gain justice in the region. Jakarta fears that if Aceh becomes independent like East Timor, then others, particularly West Papua, will follow. The expectations of the Indonesian government and GAM (*Gearakan Aceh Merdeka* – Free Aceh Movement) cannot be met. This increases the level of violence between the two, which has led to a growth in support from various groups around the world. Most of the demands want a peaceful end to the conflict, withdrawal of the military and an end to human rights violations. The recent failure of peace negotiations and the renewal of military operations have opened the Aceh problem to more extensive international pressure.

Collier and Hoeffler (2001), cited in Ross (2002), explain that in order to win the “war” against the government, the rebel group must be able to finance themselves. This can be done by appealing to their diasporas (their communities overseas), extorting money from the land's primary commodity producers and from their own unfriendly governments. GAM, however, cannot rely on funding from other countries, as there are only a few supporters of their rebellion. GAM has raised money itself in several ways, such as from donations from its members and from sympathisers, both within the region and overseas, (especially those who live in Malaysia and Thailand), taxes (from villagers and households), extortion (from foreign business operating in Aceh), robbery, and sometimes by the sale of timber and drugs (Ross, 2002: 33).

As a result of the advance of information technology, Acehnese people have succeeded in appealing to the world about their case through the internet. Some internet sites have been established to gain greater acknowledgment from the world for the Acehnese independence struggle. The chairman of SIRA (*Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh* or the Centre of Information for Aceh Referendum), Muhammad Nazar (SIRA, 1999) says “The most important factor in

gaining independence is communication with international powers... and... the Internet is the only way we can achieve this". SIRA sends e-mails from Banda Aceh to the United Nations and to NGOs, as well as press releases to the foreign media. The internet also enables GAM guerrillas living in the jungle to be updated with international news (Gay, 2001).

The neighbourhood atmosphere has been important as a source of support for nationalist movements. Support is sometimes given for reasons of geographical proximity, ethical, racial and religious, or because of economic and political factors. However, the attitudes of neighbours can vary. The official government usually supports the position of the Indonesian government. The ASEAN member countries have officially committed to the implementation of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) as a code of conduct governing relations among states in the region for the promotion of peace and stability.

Nevertheless, a government's attitude can be different from the attitude of its people. Aceh case has attracted attention from neighbouring countries. Although it is difficult to determine whether all non-government bodies support the independence of Aceh, they at least show deep concern about the situation developing in Aceh. Among the countries offering a form of solidarity to Aceh is Malaysia. Malaysian support for the Acehnese maybe linked to their geographical proximity and religious matters.

Australia is a country that has scrutinised any developments in Indonesia, its closest neighbour. As a 'white tribe in Asia,' with many racial, religious, social and economic differences from its neighbours, Australia has always been suspicious of, and sometimes over-reactive and hostile to, situations in Indonesia. This has led to the uneasiness of Australia's relationship with Indonesia. However, the Australian government's official attitude has been supportive of the government of Indonesia. In terms of the problems in Aceh, Australia does not support independence, but stresses the need for international support to solve the crisis. Altman (2003) suggests that, "many Australians support separatist movements in parts of Indonesia out of deeply felt humanitarian reasons. But not all independence movements are worthy of support..." Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer stated that Australia's stance on Aceh remains unchanged and that they will not support calls for a United Nations supervised independence referendum in Aceh (Demaria, 2000).

Indonesia has been an important country to the US due to its location, size and resources. For the US, Indonesia has provided the political and strategic 'center of gravity' for Southeast Asia. Indonesia's political and economic development is critical to the stability of Southeast Asia. This development would be important to the allies of US in Southeast Asia, including Australia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore (Montaperto, et al, 2000).

The attitude of US toward the Aceh conflict is clearly supportive of the Indonesian government's position in maintaining territorial its integrity. In a Presidential Statement on the Free Aceh Movement in 15 May 2003, President Bush stated that the US "strongly supports efforts to pursue a negotiated peace in Aceh within the framework of a unified Indonesia. The US, however, might be tempted to intervene to protect their economic interests, which may be endangered by the protracted conflict, as happened in 2001 where Exxon-Mobile needed to re-open its operations after closure due to lack of security. Human rights groups reported that Exxon Mobil Indonesia spent five billion Rupiah (US\$530,000) per month on security forces (JATAM, 2002)

While Aceh's guerrillas were reported to be receiving arms through Malaysia and Thailand, some of the guerillas received training in Libya, although they brought no arms back home (HRW, 1999). Libya has historically supported Muslim rebellions in Southeast Asia, including Aceh. Libya has been linked to the Aceh conflict as indicated by the training of GAM guerillas in Libya and the close connection between Tiro and Qadaffi in the past. The Indonesian government has announced its plan to open an embassy in Libya.

#### ***External support for Papua***

Different from Aceh and East Timor, the West Papuan struggle for independence can be seen as less attractive for the central government, due to its remote distance from Jakarta and the smaller capacity of the OPM's (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka* – Free Papua Movement) endowment. However, Jakarta cannot ignore their demands for independence, as their development could be a potentially serious challenge to Indonesian unity, although support and solidarity world wide for this independent movement has been relatively small.

During the Cold War period, external support could not be effectively cultivated and hence, there was only little support given to West Papuans. Ondawame claims that the governments of Australia, The Netherlands, the United States and United Nations should be responsible "for their part in denying the legitimate right of choice to the peoples in West Papua during the confrontation between Indonesia and the Dutch in the 1960s.... [because they] have intentionally violated the rights of our people for the sake of protecting their own strategic, political and economic interests" (<http://www.converge.org.nz>, 1999). Human rights abuses and environmental destruction have attracted regional and international attention to West Papua and their call for self-determination. The independence of East Timor has also encouraged West Papuans to more actively internationalise their cause.

Pacific Island countries have been the main targets for West Papuan diplomacy to seek support. Among South Pacific countries, Vanuatu is the only Pacific country to openly and consistently

support the Papuan claim. The support has been shown since Vanuatu became independent in 1980. The first Vanuatu Prime Minister, Fr Walter Lini, invited Rex Rumakiek, an OPM activist to open an information office in Port Vila that enabled him to spread OPM propaganda. Also, Vanuatu brought the West Papuan case to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting and at the South Pacific Forum, although this attempt had been discouraged by PNG. Vanuatu's steady support for West Papua has led diplomatic tension between Jakarta and Port Villa (<http://www.dephan.go.id/modules.php>, 2003). Vanuatu has been known as a country that would support the people who struggle for self-determination.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is an eastern half of the whole New Guinea island. Psychologically, West Papuans feel close to their blood brother living in PNG. It is normal to say there has been a tendency that the people of PNG sympathize with the struggle of West Papuans. However, the government's official regards West Papua as an integral part of Indonesia. The PNG government has consistently reaffirmed this attitude.

The relation between Jakarta and Port Moresby has been problematic as far as West Papua problems are concerned. As a result of geographical proximity, PNG has been used as the important basis for OPM guerrillas and PNG has been the first country felt affected by West Papua separatist movement, for instance, by refugees flowing into PNG areas, which has created diplomatic tensions between Indonesia and PNG. PNG government has often been placed in a difficult position between humanitarian reasons, by helping the border crossers, and political one, to maintain a good relationship with Indonesia. Until recently, PNG's decision does not change. Indonesia tries its best to maintain a friendly relationship with PNG as a necessity to handle the Papua rebellions as well as to establish a closer relationship with Pacific Island countries since PNG can be seen as a mediator between Indonesia and those island countries.

Despite efforts by Aceh and West Papua pro-independence activists supported by few countries and some NGOs, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that several Indonesian regions struggling for independence should not be allowed to follow East Timor's path to nationhood. Annan emphasised, "The UN respects the territorial integrity of Indonesia" (Associated Press Worldstream, 2002).

### **Conclusion**

The support from external parties to the separatist groups in Indonesia so far is moral and instrumental but not yet in the form of diplomatic recognition to the territorial claims. Countries do not risk their diplomatic ties with the 'old state' by a formal recognition to the supposed 'new state'. Most external parties, especially countries, would prefer to see a peace resolution to the secessionist conflicts.

ASEAN has been the most important regional organization for Indonesian foreign policy. ASEAN member countries have shown their commitment to continuously support Indonesian territorial integrity. Although there are several segments of society within the member support the separatist groups, this does not affect the official government decision. ASEAN leaders will not support secessionism in Indonesia in expense of the future of the organisation that commits to the implementation of ASEAN Vision 2020 for the Integration of ASEAN.

Papua New Guinea is the closest kin state to West Papuans and both Indonesia and PNG have their own of separatist problems. As the political understanding matures, the relations of the two countries improve. The improvement hinders each other to support separatist rebellions in each country, although undeniably there are some segments of the society in both Indonesia and PNG are sympathetic to their kin ethnic for their secessionist intentions. Most Pacific Island countries, except Vanuatu, officially support Indonesian territorial integrity.

Yet, although most countries support Indonesian territorial integrity it is not impossible that they change attitude if human rights violation still going on in the restive provinces.

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