

Acheh: The Social Form of `Natural' Disaster

Peter Hudis

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That which reason consider evil, is not evil in respect to the order and laws of nature as a whole, but only in respect to the laws of our own reason.

-Spinoza

The tsunami that impacted over a dozen nations in the Indian Ocean region at the end of 2004 was a natural catastrophe, but it was no less of a social disaster. Nowhere is that truer than in Acheh, the province of northern Sumatra that was most gravely affected by the tsunami. According to last reports 150,000 were killed and 400,000 made homeless. The capital, Banda Acheh, experienced enormous damage while the coastal town of Meulobah was virtually leveled, losing between a third and half of its populace.

Nowhere have the social dimensions of the natural disaster been more evident than in Acheh itself. Although Acheh has widely exploited oil reserves it is one of the poorest parts of Indonesia. It was an independent country for centuries before being taken over by the Dutch in the colonial period. At Indonesia's founding Acheh was promised special autonomous status, but the promise was never kept. In response to economic impoverishment and political disenfranchisement, a mass movement for independence and self-determination arose there in the mid-1970s. This movement is multifaceted and broad-based. It includes an armed-guerrilla wing as well as non-violent groups of students, women, and human rights associations. In 1999 almost one million Achenese (a quarter of the province's populace) attended a demonstration for independence in front of the Grand Mosque in Banda Acheh (the Mosque is now often shown in TV footage of the tsunami disaster, as it is one of the only buildings remaining in the center of town). Though the rally was one of the political largest protests in human history, it was largely ignored by the Western press and barely mentioned even in progressive, left wing circles in the West.

Such developments did not fail to catch the attention of the Indonesian military. In the past ten years it has killed 10,000 Achenese in a crackdown that has included the suspension of

civil liberties and the imposition (since 2003) of martial law. Despite this repression, the Indonesian government has faced little pressure to change its policies—even by many who had supported the movement for self-determination in East Timor. Aceh has all too often been viewed as an “internal” matter of Indonesia since it was part of the country since it was founded. And since the U.S. had no direct role in the repression of the Aceh independence movement, the anti-war movements in Europe and the U.S. have largely overlooked the Achenese struggle.

These factors helped set the ground for the social dimension of the disaster that struck on Dec. 26. For several years the Indonesian government had banned foreign aid organizations, human rights groups, NGO’s, and even tourists from coming to Aceh. Therefore, when the tsunami struck on Dec. 26 the province was left with the weakest disaster-relief mechanisms of any land in the Indian Ocean region. Even worse, the government worked to prevent widespread access to the province after the tsunami struck out of concern that its violation of Achenese human rights would become widely known. Every dimension of the natural disaster immediately assumed a social form. The Western media has reported the logistical and technical problems in getting material aid to Aceh, often presenting this as a consequence of the destruction of roads and airfields. Rarely reported is that the Indonesian government, out of fear that relief aid might fall directly into the hands of the Achenese resistance forces, insisted that all material aid for Aceh be delivered to Medan, 300 miles south of Banda Aceh. Once the aid was delivered to Medan it was “discovered” that the roads from Medan to Aceh were too damaged to transport the goods north.

Even though a considerable amount of international aid began to pour into Aceh in mid-January, the Indonesian government refused to call off its war against its populace. It ignored calls from the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), the armed wing of the struggle, for a ceasefire. It has banned foreign soldiers and aid workers from many parts of Aceh, insisting that foreigners apply for “special military approval” due to “security risks.” On Jan. 9 Indonesian Vice-President Jusuf Kalla declared that foreigners are restricted to the city of Banda Aceh, even though many devastated areas on the western coast remained unvisited by aid workers. In response to such conditions, the Bangkok-based Asia Forum listed a series of abuses and incompetence on the part of the Indonesian government in dispersing aid and demanded that the military allow the free flow of food, water, and medical assistance. It said even local NGO’s are being prevented from distributing aid to certain affected regions. The Non-Violence International declared, “Delays by the Indonesian government in allowing international access to Aceh may have needlessly cost precious lives.”

While the Indonesian government and military prevented independent forces from having free access to all of Aceh, it invited two Islamic fundamentalist groups to the province within weeks of the disaster, the Islamic Defenders Front (IDF) and Indonesia Mujahidin Council (IMC). Both were established by the military in 1998 to harass pro-democracy activists and nationalist movements in various parts of Indonesia. The government will no doubt use these groups to help to maintain “order” in Aceh, where the populace favors a moderate, tolerate version of Islam that groups like the IDF and IMC despise. The Government of Aceh in Exile, speaking for the resistance movement, stated in response to the arrival of the IDF and IMC: “The introduction of these organizations into Aceh at this most critical time squanders scarce resources by the Indonesian government which is better allocated to victims of the recent tsunami.”

Few press reports have called attention to the impact of the tsunami on the liberation movement in Aceh itself. The main prison in Aceh, which housed many of its political prisoners, was destroyed in the tsunami and it is feared that all the prisoners are now dead. This apparently includes Cut Nur Asikin, who had tried to generate international support for Aceh when she traveled to the U.S. several years ago. Moreover, in many towns and villages aid is given to tsunami victims only if they present “red and white” special ID cards issued by the Indonesian police; those who support the resistance are almost certain not to possess them. Such conditions are producing growing anger amongst the populace. Even many who support the resistance have expressed shock at the lack of sensitivity shown by the government.

This could have far-reaching ramifications. One thing that has changed since the tsunami is that Aceh is becoming more widely discussed. Many are beginning to learn of its movement for self-determination for the first time and are concerned at the actions of the Indonesian military. The social dimension of the disaster therefore potentially contains a dual form. While the impact of the tsunami is made worse by the repressive actions of the Indonesian government, the increased attention on Aceh contains the seeds for developing a new level of political as well as humanitarian solidarity with its residents.

Releasing the potentialities of social solidarity with the people of Aceh requires that we ask why it took a natural disaster to even begin to focus attention on its movement for self-determination. The lack of attention by the Bush administration is hardly surprising; it has never shown any sympathy with the Achenese rebels and U.S. relations with Indonesia, as with all nations, is defined by the sole purpose of finding allies in the “war on terrorism.” Colin Powell suggested on his trip to Aceh after the tsunami that the Bush administration would consider lifting restrictions on arms sales to Indonesia—even though criticisms of

Indonesia's actions in the province are hardly unknown to him. Such political insensitivity, unfortunately, is hardly the preserve of only the Bush administration. The lack of attention accorded Aceh by many opponents of U.S. foreign policy is no less egregious. It recalls the silence on the part of much of the Left towards the Bosnian and Kosovar struggles for self-determination in the 1990s—a silence that was only broken when Clinton attacked Serbia in 1998. Though Kosova had one of the largest democratic movements in recent European history in the early 1990s, when its citizenry created a veritable parallel civil society in response to Serbian repression, it received minimal discussion or recognition even in progressive circles.

Far too many critics of U.S. foreign policy seem to focus on crisis-points only when the U.S. military becomes directly involved in them. When the U.S. is not on the scene there seems little incentive to take notice of events on the ground—be it in Bosnia, Kosova, Aceh or Sudan. Too many have allowed the scope of their concerns to be determined by U.S. actions instead of solidarizing with popular struggles on their own terms. What this shows is that negation is always dependent on the object of its critique. While those who focus on crisis-points like Afghanistan, Iraq, or Palestine may think they are directly challenging U.S. hegemony, their choice of concerns are often predetermined by U.S. actions. Such critics are therefore not as free from the object of their critique as they presume. They have even become dependent on it. After all, why should we allow our enemy to decide what we should pay attention to? Why should we allow our minds to be governed by the priorities that dictate the “war on terror”? The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq should definitely be opposed, but must we do so at the cost of ignoring struggles for democracy and self-determination in parts of the world that the Bush administration seems (at least for now) to be disinterested in?

In light of the social crisis gripping Aceh, two forms of response are needed. One response is humanitarian. The need for food, water, medicine and housing will be felt for a long time to come. While many private individuals and governments have made generous donations to the relief efforts, much of the aid is being channeled through UN agencies or mainstream charities that have contracts with the Indonesian government that prevents them from taking actions opposed by it. This means that much of the relief aid will end in the hands of the Indonesian military, where it will be stolen or used for political purposes. It is therefore vital that humanitarian aid be sent to the independent groups in Aceh that can deliver the aid quickly, properly, and impartially. The second response is political. In light of the crisis that has engulfed the Indian Ocean region, but especially Aceh, it is urgent that the situation in Aceh become better known and that international solidarity be developed with its struggle for self-determination. The movement in Aceh is diverse and

multifaceted, but it is committed to a democratic and popular solution to a crisis that has raged for decades. If Aceh is left to suffer the twin blows of natural and social disaster, we will not have nature to blame; we will only have ourselves.

Nature may be destructive and uncaring, but it is not evil in and of itself; it is only the capacities we possess as self-determined subjects that allow us to conceive of evil in the first place. The laws of our reason compel us to think outside the framework of established discourse, which entails never allowing the object of our critique to define our mental horizon. The intersection of natural and social disaster is tragic, but it is also illuminating, as it reminds us that minds rise to their fullest stature when they are connected with the body of a people.

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