

Acehnese struggle for self-determination, 1998-2001

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [1]
- [an example of regime change](#) [2]
- [included participation by more than one social class](#) [3]

Timing

May

1998

to:

July

2001

Location and Goals

Country:

Indonesia

Country:

Aceh

Location City/State/Province:

Aceh (territory in Indonesia), cities and rural villages; Banda Aceh (capital), Pulo Rungkom, Beutong, Ujong Blang

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

- 1) achieve a referendum for independence and ultimately create a separate Islamic state
- 2) receive justice for human rights violations
- 3) make external allies out of the UN, NGOs and regional powers.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 068. Sanctuary
- 097. Protest strike
- 117. General strike
- 124. Boycott of elections
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities

- 177. Speak-in

Methods in 4th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 026. Paint as protest
- 033. Fraternalization
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 180. Alternative communication system

Segment Length:

Approximately 6.5 months

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Students in Aceh
- intellectuals
- rural villagers
- workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

SIRA (Campaign for a Referendum in Aceh) (Leader Muhammad Nazzar); FARMIDA (Aceh Student Action Front for Reform, Leaders Taufiq Abda and Radhi Darmansyah)

Partners:

FP HAM (Forum Peduli Hak Asasi Manusia or Care Human Rights Forum); FLOWER ACEH (Women

Activities for Rural Progress); SMUR (Student Solidarity for the People); KARMA (Coalition for Reform Action of Acehese Students); YADESA (Rural Community Development Foundation, Aceh); Black Cats
External allies:

TAPOL (UK human rights organization focusing on Indonesia); Peace Brigades International; Nonviolent International; Human Rights Watch; Save the Children; Oxfam; US government (earmarked 5 million dollars for civil society development in Aceh); Support Committee for Human Rights in Aceh (SCHRA); The Henri Dunant Center for Humanitarian Dialogue

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- FARMIDA (Aceh Student Action Front for Reform)
- Flower Aceh
- KARMA (Coalition for Reform Action of Acehese Students)
- SIRA (Sentral Informasi Refurendum Aceh)
- SMUR (Student Solidarity for the People)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Human Rights Watch
- Nonviolent International
- Oxfam
- Peace Brigades International
- Save the Children
- Support Committee for Human Rights in Aceh (SCHRA)
- TAPOL
- US government

Groups in 5th Segment:

- The Henri Dunant Center for Humanitarian Dialogue

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Joining order of other groups not known

Segment Length:

Approximately 6.5 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Indonesian government and armed forces (TNI)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Arrests, imprisonment, civilian massacres, murder, intimidation, kidnappings, disappearances, lootings, beatings, and raiding of student headquarters

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

2 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

6 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

While students groups and their networks grew tremendously, attracting international attention and support, and building internal strength and organization, they only got somewhat close to realizing their goals. Although a temporary, if not strictly enforced, peace agreement was made in 2000, no radical change seems to have occurred in terms of Aceh's autonomy during the course of the campaign. However, campaigners were successful at uniting diverse groups within Aceh around political issues and at attracting international attention from states and NGOs. It is also difficult to assess the success of nonviolent campaigners due to the fact that the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was engaged in violent struggle simultaneously for similar goals, often causing repression and silencing of all people of Aceh. A more detailed study might reveal ways in which the nonviolent campaigners and GAM helped each other and also thwarted each other's goals.

Beginning with student organization, Acehnese networks grew rapidly, incorporating large segments of Acehnese society including rural and urban populations, students, workers, and local NGOs. Later the groups were able to attract allies and media coverage from large international NGOs, humanitarian groups, and state humanitarian agencies. Civil society networks grew enough to express their voice over the Free Aceh Movement's guerrilla war, while advocating for similar goals.

For a half-century prior to the Acehnese campaign, the Indonesian government had ruled Aceh, located at the northwestern end of the island of Sumatra. The Acehnese suffered a high level of human rights abuses at the hands of the Indonesian government. From the 1950s until 1998, an Acehnese group resisted using violence. But in the late 1990's, their resistance, led by student activists, took the form of nonviolence in a series of rallies, boycotts and strikes. The Acehnese goal was to promote social change by demanding the following: a referendum for independence (in the form of a separate Islamic state), justice for human rights violations, and outside assistance from the UN, NGOs, and regional powers.

The long-term policy of Indonesian dictator Suharto had been to purge any suspected leftists and take most of Aceh's wealth (Aceh is rich in natural resources). In 1976, a militant group, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), began to wage guerilla war on the Indonesian military (TNI). The Indonesian military turned Aceh into a "free-fire zone". This resulted in more human rights violations and approximately 12,000 civilians killed.

In May 1998, Suharto was removed from office in a civil insurrection, which influenced the Acehnese campaign.

In 1998 and 1999, student organizations in Aceh developed a nonviolent strategy that would begin the campaign

for a referendum. FARMIDA (Aceh Student Action Front for Reform), SMUR (Student Solidarity for the People), KARMA (Coalition for Reform Action of Acehese Students), Flower Aceh, and SIRA (Sentral Informasi Refurendum Aceh) were the student organizations that led the protests. SIRA was particularly notable at most of the protests and rallies. They created signs, posters, flags, banners, and wall paintings denouncing the government. They organized other acts of resistance using Islamic, nonviolent strategy later called 'Islamic Peaceful Action,' rejecting both Indonesian rule and the armed struggle of the GAM. They also formed networks with rural villages, civilians, high school students, intellectuals, and workers, organizing local self-defense and self-reliance groups in many areas. Many Acehese turned to these groups to administer justice and settle disputes as an alternative to the military and police.

On May 3, 1999, sixty people were killed and 150 wounded by the military, including women and children, in the village of Pulo Rungkom (North Aceh) in one of the deadliest massacres of that time.

The next month, Acehese boycotted parliamentary elections. Polling officials traveling to the villages were met with calls for a referendum. Thousands of rural villagers escaped from military repression by hiding out in urban mosques and schools. Within days, the vote was called off.

Spontaneous and organized demonstrations of support continued. Paintings, posters, and banners were still spread throughout Aceh. The word 'referendum' was painted on the streets and the GAM flag was displayed in places as well.

In July, between 53 and 72 people were killed at a private Islamic school in Beutong in West Aceh, including a respected religious leader, Teungku Bantaqiah.

At the end of August, at the opposite end of the Indonesian archipelago, East Timorese voted in an internationally supervised election to secede from Indonesia thanks to a UN-backed referendum on independence. Acehese activists were inspired and called for the same right that East Timor exercised.

In September, student activists, led by SIRA, organized a two-day, province-wide strike, stopping Aceh's economy and government, including communication and travel sectors.

During the summer and fall months of 1999 TNI troop levels in Aceh were alleged between 42,000 and 70,000. In early October, in Ujong Blang (North Aceh), about 40 civilians were killed by the TNI. The GAM retaliated soon after. The TNI formed militias around villages to intimidate and terrorize; kidnappings, disappearances, lootings, arrests, and shootouts were common.

Also in October, however, the people of Indonesia elected a new President, Abdurrahman Wahid. Wahid immediately ordered that troops withdraw from Aceh, as a way of appeasing the Acehese who desired this separate Islamic state. Units from the police Brimob elite battalion replaced the soldiers.

In early November, there was a mass rally in Banda Aceh, the capital. Hundreds of thousands of people participated in the rally. The various student organizations led the rally. On November 25, approximately 2,000 Acehese demonstrators invaded Indonesia's parliament to demand the referendum for independence. Demonstrators held a flag emblazoned with the word "referendum".

Other groups utilized different tactics during this time period. An undercover organization called Black Cats joined the campaign by spreading agents across the Aceh province whose job was to suppress rumors by reporting the truth and to organize neighborhood patrols to catch "rumor-mongers" that may have been paid off by the army. The Black Cats also established contact with both army officers and GAM leaders in order to quell

potential conflict.

In December, President Wahid insisted that independence was not an option. Despite this, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) proclaimed itself as the legitimate government of Aceh. With this announcement, international organizations that had left several years prior began to return. NGOs, human rights groups (TAPOL, Human Rights Watch, Peace Brigades International, and others), international humanitarian agencies (Save the Children, Oxfam, and others), and international solidarity groups all supported the Acehnese as allies in their struggle. The US government would later earmark 5 million dollars for civil society development in Aceh the following the year and make additional contributions in years after. Support within the Acehnese diaspora increased as well. Acehnese people in Indonesia, Malaysia, and elsewhere raised funds and held educational conferences.

During this time, approximately 7,000 non-Acehnese residents of Aceh fled the province in anticipation of a violent upheaval from the Indonesian military. There was indeed violence during this time. On December 4, Indonesian soldiers shot and wounded at least 12 demonstrators waving rebel flags in Aceh.

At the end of 1999, the Indonesian government began negotiations with GAM. In early 2000, an agreement was settled (with the help of the Henri Dunant Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, a third party Swiss organization) entitled "A Joint Understanding for Humanitarian Pause". This agreement was broken, however, many times, especially by the TNI. SIRA and other organizations pushed for a better agreement but faced threats, arrests, beatings, and even assassinations from the TNI and Indonesian security forces.

TNI troops quickly resumed their occupation in Aceh. And although GAM was established as the government, many of the nonviolent activists did not particularly care for GAM and their various methods of governing. In a way, GAM undermined the goals of the students and other activists because GAM promoted violence as a way of achieving goals. Violence ensued.

In 2001, multiple external allies of the campaign were assassinated in Aceh. In May 2001, SIRA's office was raided. On July 20, activists from a nonviolent protest were at the offices of the Legal Aid Institute when the security forces raided the office and confiscated the computer as well as important documentation.

Some subsequent political agreements were reached to provide Aceh with expanded autonomy and peace zones, but war continued along with many TNI abuses and crimes. It wasn't until after the devastating tsunami in 2004 that GAM and the Indonesian government signed a Peace Accord in 2005. Aceh was given greater autonomy and control of its natural resources and the European Union established the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) to oversee the implementation of the agreement.

Research Notes

Influences:

The East Timorese struggle for independence influenced this campaign (see "East Timorese activists campaign for independence from Indonesia 1987-2002")(1).

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Additional Notes:

This is one of many cases where an attempt was made with violence before switching to nonviolent struggle. GAM used violence for many years prior to this campaign.

Parallel to the students were nearly a hundred other groups and NGOs working to educate and train human rights workers and offer support for Acehese survivors. For example, FP HAM (Forum Peduli Hak Asasi Manusia or Care Human Rights Forum) ran a human rights monitoring organization based in Banda Aceh, FLOWER ACEH (Women Activities for Rural Progress) gave economic aid and empowerment to village women, and YADESA (Rural Community Development Foundation, Aceh) offered rehabilitation for torture victims and training for health professionals and psychologists.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (24/06/2011)

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