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Ethnic politics and local political parties in Indonesia

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Since Indonesia's return to multiparty democracy in 1999, national law makers have introduced regulations that effectively ban ethnic or regionally based political parties. A major exception to the rule can be found in the province of Aceh where ethnic separatists were granted the right to form their own political party to contest local elections in return for giving up their armed struggle for independence. In legislative elections held in 2009 the party of the former rebels – the Aceh Party – won a landslide victory. Drawing on in-depth interviews with national party leaders and parliamentarians, this article examines the implications of the rise of the Aceh Party for Indonesia's political party system and the potential for ethnic-based parties to resolve ethnic conflict and secessionism in other parts of Indonesia, including in Papua where the failure of special autonomy arrangements has led to increased militancy among indigenous Papuans.

Keywords: Indonesia; Aceh; conflict; political parties; post-conflict; separatist movements; peace building; elections; regional autonomy

Introduction

Since Indonesia's return to multiparty democracy in 1999, national law makers have introduced regulations that effectively ban local political parties. Indonesia is the only multiparty democracy in the world that prohibits local political parties from contesting even local elections. Indonesia's leaders argue that local parties could become vehicles for ethnic or regional identity-based politics, directly threatening social stability and the territorial integrity of the Indonesian state. However, despite this deep-seated aversion to local political parties, in 2005 national political elites were pressured into making an exception. Under the terms of the historic peace agreement signed between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement, the former rebels would give up their armed struggle for independence in return for the right to participate in the governance of an autonomous Aceh. A key condition of the agreement was that the rebels be allowed to form their own political party to contest provincial and district-level legislative elections. In the 2009 legislative elections the newly established Aceh Party won the largest number of seats in the provincial legislature in a landslide victory – a feat that represents a major challenge to the logic of post-Suharto party politics in Indonesia. Drawing on in-depth interviews with national party leaders and parliamentarians, this article

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examines the implications of the rise of the Aceh Party for Indonesia's political party system and the potential for Aceh to serve as a model for resolving ethnic conflict and secessionism in other parts of Indonesia, including in Papua where the failure of special autonomy arrangements has led to increased militancy among indigenous Papuan rights activists.

The evolution of Indonesia's political party system

National political leaders' aversion to regional or ethnic-based political parties has its roots in the political upheavals of the early years of the Republic. Indonesia's first constitution of 1945 gave extensive powers to the office of President, and was widely criticized by a younger generation of nationalists as being authoritarian. Three months after the declaration of independence, the government executive issued a new decree, which paved the way for the establishment of constitutional democracy on the basis of parliamentary democracy.¹ Under this system, the President remained as head of state, but government was placed largely in the hands of prime ministers held accountable to parliament.² During this period political parties flourished, including many with a regional or ethnic base. More than 30 political parties and candidates backed by other organizations took part in Indonesia's landmark legislative elections of 1955. Regional parties performed particularly well, although their votes were generally concentrated in their regional bases. In West Kalimantan, for example, the United Dayak Party (*Partai Persatuan Dayak*) received the second highest number of votes. *Perti*, a local Islamic Party, also received the second highest number of votes in Central Sumatra. Other local political parties contesting the 1955 election included the Sunda Election Movement (*Gerakan Pilihan Sunda*) and the Banten Movement (*Gerakan Banten*) in West Java, *Grindo* in Yogyakarta, and Royal United Indonesia (*Persatuan Indonesia Raya*) in West Nusa Tenggara. The results of the 1955 elections also demonstrated that Indonesia's national parties also relied heavily on ethnic and regional support bases. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) relied on support from Central and East Java. Masyumi – its main rival – drew much of its support from Indonesia's periphery, notably non-Javanese groups in Kalimantan, Sulawesi and Sumatra. The Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI) was predominantly Javanese.

But Indonesia's parliamentary democracy did not survive for long after the 1955 elections. While the reasons for the collapse of parliamentary democracy and the introduction of 'guided democracy' in 1959 remain a subject of intense debate,³ the political upheavals of the period are today closely associated with the rise of regionalism and ethnic conflict, which are perceived to have been fueled by the narrow interests of regional political parties. During this period many regional political parties became hostile to the central government, as separatist movements emerged in West and North Sumatra, West Java and South Sulawesi. Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, responded to the political crisis by reinstating the 1945 constitution, which returned all executive powers to the President and even subverted the courts to the office of the President. Blaming political parties for the

¹Vice-Presidential Decree No. 10, 1945.

²Nasution, 'Towards Constitutional Democracy'.

³Feith, *The Decline*; Fealy, 'Parties and Parliament'; Mietzner, 'Comparing Indonesia's party systems'.

crisis, Sukarno sought to curtail their influence. During Sukarno's 'guided democracy' period (1959–1965) the army displaced political parties at the centre of power. The army was given representation in Cabinet while cabinet ministers were barred from joining political parties.⁴

The disdain of the President and the military for political parties came to be shared by the wider public, as many ordinary citizens blamed the narrow interests and intrigues of the elite-led parties for the country's woes. The shift in public opinion enabled General Suharto to further undermine political parties when he assumed the Presidency following the coup of 1966. Suharto expanded Golkar – a party founded in 1964 to represent the interests of the military and the civil service – to become the electoral machine of his authoritarian regime.⁵ Other political parties were banned or forcibly amalgamated, diluting their influence. From 1973 until the collapse of the regime in 1998 only two other parties were recognized: the United Development Party – an amalgamation of four Islamic political parties, and the Indonesia Democratic Party – an amalgamation of five non-Islamic parties.

The collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998 in the wake of the Asian Financial Crisis and the pressures of the *Reformasi* movement paved the way for dramatic political liberalization. The country's new rulers led by president Habibie sought to break up the concentration of power at the center through democratic reforms and decentralization. The return to democracy unleashed an explosion of new political parties. Forty eight political parties contested the 1999 parliamentary elections – the first free and fair elections since 1955. But this explosion in the number of political parties greatly worried many leaders in the central government. In 1999 the country had yet to recover from the social and economic instability unleashed by the collapse of the Suharto regime. Instability was felt most keenly in the country's periphery where economic deprivation and political uncertainty fueled an escalation of communal conflict. East Timor broke away from Indonesia in 1999 while separatist rebels in Aceh reinvigorated their armed struggle for independence. National political elites feared a return to the regionalism and ethnic conflicts associated with Indonesia's first experiment with parliamentary democracy in the 1950s. They were supported by a number of political analysts who predicted at the time that sectarian violence and centrifugal forces would cause the state's collapse.⁶ It was against this background that stricter political party regulations were introduced. To minimize the potential for political parties to become vehicles for ethnic or religious-based conflict, new laws effectively banned regional and political parties from contesting elections.

The tightening of laws on political party activity began with the introduction of a parliamentary threshold, recently increased from two to two and a half per cent of the total vote, which reduced the number of parties eligible to occupy seats in parliament. In 2002 a new Law on Political Parties was passed to ensure that only political parties with a cross-national organizational basis would be eligible to contest elections. The law required political parties to establish executive boards in at least 50% of Indonesia's provinces and in at least 50% of districts (*kabupaten*) and municipalities (*kota*) within those provinces. Furthermore, the law required political

⁴Mietzner, *Military Politics*.

⁵In the post-Suharto era Golkar has transformed into a more conventional political party. See Dirk Tomsa, *Party Politics and Democratisation in Indonesia: Golkar in the Post-Suharto Era*.

⁶Rabasa and Chalk, *Indonesia's Transformation*.

parties to maintain branches at least 25% of subdistricts (*kecamatan*) in each such district or municipality. This means that to be eligible to contest elections in Indonesia a party must maintain thousands of branch offices across thousands of kilometers of territory. While some parties have managed to circumvent the onerous regulations by simply hanging party signs over shopfronts during election periods, significant resources are required nation-wide to accomplish this.

While the new regulations reduced the effective number of political parties to just nine after the 2004 legislative elections, some elements within the central government wanted to further restrict regional parties. A new draft of the law on Political Parties tabled in parliament in 2007 proposed to increase the minimal representational requirement to 75% of Indonesia's provinces. Civil society organizations protested loudly during deliberations, arguing that this would unfairly advantage incumbent parties and disadvantage smaller parties. In the final legislation – Law No 20/2008 on Political Parties – the bar was set at 60%. While such laws are common in new democracies – Turkey, Nigeria, Mexico and Thailand, for example, have all introduced laws to encourage parties to develop a national base, Indonesia's political party laws are particularly restrictive in that they apply to all elections in the country. In Indonesia local political parties are prevented from contesting even local elections.⁷

The conflict in Aceh and the circumstances leading to the emergence of local political parties

An important exception to Indonesia's ban on ethnic parties in Indonesia emerged only in 2005. The exception was for Aceh – Indonesia's westernmost province – and was the product of a peace settlement between the Government of Indonesia and the Aceh-based separatist group known as the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*; GAM). While GAM was founded in 1976, conflict between local groups in Aceh and Indonesia's central government had simmered since the birth of the new Republic of Indonesia in 1949. Until Dutch conquest in the late nineteenth century Aceh had enjoyed centuries of independence. Situated at the entrance to the Malacca Straits – the main trade route between Ottoman Turkey and East Asia – the Acehese sultanate enjoyed extensive trade and communication across the Indian Ocean and became known as the Gateway to Mecca for its prominent role in adopting and propagating Islam throughout the archipelago. International commerce, Islam and Arab customs helped to shape a distinct Acehese identity aligned with a strong state. In fact, prior to Dutch conquest, in 1873 Aceh had almost no connection with other regions in the Dutch East Indies.⁸

When Acehese elites agreed to join the new Indonesia in 1949, they requested 'special autonomy' status for Aceh – a reflection of their strong sense of distinct regional and ethnic identity. Relations between the Aceh elite and the Java-based nationalist leaders of Indonesian soured when this request was rejected in favor of integrating Aceh into the Province of North Sumatra. Aceh's political and religious elites soon found an opportunity to express their resentment. When a movement dedicated to establishing an Islamic State that broke out in Java in the early 1950s, Acehese elites supported the rebellion in the hope of securing their own

⁷Reilly, 'Introduction'.

⁸Reid, 'Introduction'.

independence. The Darul Islam rebellion lasted until 1959. As part of the settlement, Jakarta agreed to grant Aceh special autonomy status.⁹ Despite this concession, Acehnese trust in Jakarta continued to deteriorate. The implementation of special autonomy status was delayed by many years and was ultimately revoked in 1968 when General Suharto seized power. Tensions continued to simmer under Suharto's centralist and authoritarian regime. The discovery in the 1970 of large oil and gas deposits off the Acehnese coast added fresh stimulus to local grievances. Contracting exploration and drilling to American oil companies, the central government appropriated the lion's share of revenue, triggering a new armed rebellion in 1976, led by Hasan Di Tiro, a former ambassador of the Darul Islam movement and a blood relation of the former sultanate. Indonesian armed forces defeated the small band of rebels in 1977, sending Hasan di Tiro and other rebel leaders into exile. In exile this group continued to work towards Aceh's independence. A group of Acehnese fighters received insurgency training in Libya before launching a second rebellion in 1989.

While Indonesia's armed forces managed to keep the still small band rebels at bay for much of the next decade, the collapse of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998 gave the Free Aceh Movement new momentum. GAM took advantage of the political vacuum to recruit new members – many of them deserters from the police and army – and to expand its area of operations in the province. GAM was also able to use people's fear of the collapse of central authority to win broader popular support. GAM also instituted a new system of taxation that funded weapons procurement and organizational strengthening.¹⁰ By the time the central government regained its footing, following a transition to democratic government in 1999, GAM had become a force to be reckoned with. While negotiations between GAM and the central government led to a cessation of hostilities agreement in 2000, the conflict remained unresolved. In 2003 a newly assertive central government under the leadership of ultra nationalist President Megawati Sukarnoputri revived counter-insurgency operations in Aceh, sending an additional 42,000 police and military personnel to the province in an attempt to wipe out GAM. This period, known as DOM, was characterized by escalating violence and rampant human rights violations.¹¹ While the Indonesian armed forces demonstrated superiority, its heavy-handedness toward those suspected of association with the rebels and exploitation of local resources only increased popular support for GAM.¹²

Despite the intensification of the conflict, negotiations begun under Swedish government sponsorship continued. Prospects for a political solution to the conflict emerged as early as 2001 during talks facilitated by the Swiss-based Henry Dunant Centre. The talks led to a provisional understanding between GAM and the Government of Indonesia that included the possibility of fresh local elections managed by an independent Acehnese elections commission, and in which Acehnese political parties might participate.¹³ The question of local parties was further explored during a subsequent round of negotiations in Switzerland February 2002.¹⁴

⁹van Dijk, *Rebellion under the Banner of Islam*.

¹⁰Schulze, *The Free Aceh Movement (GAM)*.

¹¹Miller, *Rebellion and Reform*.

¹²Aspinall, *Islam and Nation*.

¹³The question of local parties was further explored during a subsequent round of negotiations in Switzerland February 2002. See Ahmad Farhan Hamid, *Partai Politik Lokal di Aceh*.

¹⁴Hamid, *Partai Politik Lokal di Aceh*.

The political party solution to the crisis was not initially made public, however, because outright independence remained GAM's official objective and *raison d'être*. The idea that GAM might forgo its quest for independence in return for limited regional autonomy and the right to establish a local political party only became public in the first part of 2005 during a fresh round of negotiations brokered by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari. Held in the aftermath of the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, this round of negotiations showed the most hope of success because the tsunami had placed pressure on both sides to reconcile their differences in the interests of disaster recovery. During the 'Helsinki' negotiations, GAM leaders for the first time publicly acknowledged the possibility of a political settlement based on less than full independence.

The idea that GAM might be allowed to participate in Indonesia's democratic political system by forming its own political party ignited fierce debate in Indonesia. Supporters argued that local political parties would complement decentralization and state-building efforts in Indonesia.¹⁵ One prominent lawyer noted that a right to form local political parties was implicit in the right to freedom of assembly guaranteed by Indonesia's 1945 constitution.¹⁶ Another prominent Acehese politician argued that a local political party was the only viable means of integrating GAM into the political system because it had no linkages with national parties.¹⁷

But, for historical reasons outlined above, public opposition to local political parties in Indonesia remained strong. Some of Indonesia's most prominent political leaders publicly declared their antagonism to the idea. Former president Megawati Sukarnoputri argued that local parties would tear at the fabric of the nation and lead to secession.¹⁸ Reflecting the nationalist consensus dating back to the late 1950s, former president and National Awakening Party (PKB) founder Abdurrahman Wahid went so far as to suggest that local political parties were anti-democratic.¹⁹ Golkar Party Chair and DPR House Speaker Agung Laksono insisted that there was no room for local political parties in Indonesia, because political parties were, by definition, national. Former Golkar Party Chair and House Speaker Akbar Tanjung warned that local parties in Aceh would set a dangerous precedent for other areas, especially Papua.²⁰ Religious leaders also weighed into the debate. Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama Hasyim Muzadi, Jakarta Bishop Julius Kardinal Darmaatmaja and Andreas Yewangoe from the Indonesian Church Union issued a joint statement

¹⁵Silalahi, 'Parpol Lokal, Siapa Takut?'.
¹⁶Indrayan, 'Partai Politik Lokal di Aceh?'.

¹⁷Interview with former Minister for Justice and Human Rights Hasballah M. Saad, Banda Aceh, 16 June 2009.

¹⁸Speech by Megawati Sukarnoputri at the National Resilience Institute, 28 July 2005. During the speech, Megawati criticized President Susilo Bambang Yudhono and Vice President Yusuf Kalla for offering the local political party option to the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) as part of negotiations with the former rebel movement. Megawati also claimed that local political parties were 'ideological' in contrast with national parties that were more 'managerial'. *Tempo Magazine*, <http://majalah.tempointeraktif.com/id/arsip/2009/03/30/LU/mbm.20090330.LU129935.id.html> (accessed January 19, 2011).

¹⁹Speaking at the seventh anniversary of the founding of the National Awakening Party (PKB), Gus Dur declared that 'local parties are wrong, because they did not belong in a democracy. They are like establishing a state within a state'. *Kompas* 23 (July 2005).

²⁰Tempointeraktif, 20 July 2005.

condemning the idea of local political parties for Aceh, arguing that local political parties would serve as an embryo for a referendum on independence.²¹

As the Helsinki negotiations continued, a survey suggested that the Indonesian public also opposed local political parties. In the survey conducted by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) in 32 provinces, 75.8% of Indonesians expressed general opposition to local political parties, with 76.2% specifically opposed to local political parties in Aceh.²² According to political analyst Rizal Sukma, the survey results reflected public fears that local political parties would lead to national disintegration, concern that the government had been too generous in its negotiations with GAM, and lingering suspicion that GAM remained committed to independence for Aceh.²³

Widespread elite and popular suspicions of local political parties in Indonesia pressured Government of Indonesia peace negotiations. Not surprisingly, during the five intense rounds of Helsinki negotiations between January and July 2005, Indonesian government negotiators refused to consider the local party option. The Government was so determined to take this political hot potato off the table that negotiators appeared willing to offer almost anything else. Their offers to GAM included guaranteed places as candidates on national party tickets to facilitate the election of GAM representatives to public office. Indonesian negotiators at one point even suggested that GAM representatives could be directly appointed to senior government positions without standing for election. But GAM negotiators rejected these counter offers, insisting on a party of their own. In deadlock, negotiations came to the brink of collapse over the issue. Eventually, however, under international pressure to conclude the peace settlement in the context of multi-billion dollar international assistance to post-tsunami Aceh, Indonesia's President and Vice President weighed in against public opinion to accept GAM's demand. In a major victory for GAM negotiators, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed in Helsinki on 15 August 2005 included as one of its first articles, the following agreement on political participation:

As soon as possible and not longer than one year after the signing of this MoU, GOI [Government of Indonesia] agrees to and will facilitate the establishment of Aceh-based political parties that meet national criteria. Understanding the aspirations of Acehnese people for local political parties, GOI will create, within one year or at the latest 18 months after the signing of this MoU, the political legal conditions necessary for the establishment of local political parties in Aceh in consultation with Parliament. The timely implementation of this MoU will contribute positively to this end.²⁴

The Helsinki MoU was formalized into a new autonomy law for Aceh Province – the Law on Governing Aceh (UUPA), which replaced all previous laws on Aceh. Signed into effect on 1 August 2006, the UUPA contained two critical provisions regarding political participation. First, independent candidates would be allowed to contest local executive elections (Pilkada). Hitherto, all candidates for local elections had to

²¹Cited on news website www.kapanlagi.com (accessed 15 July, 2009).

²²The survey was conducted between 28 July and 2 August, 2005.

²³'Survei LSI: Rakyat Tak Dukung Parpol Lokal' [LSI Survey: People Do Not Support Local Political Parties], *Sinar Harapan*, 16 (August 2005); 'Partai Lokal, Ujian Eksistensi GAM di NAD' (Local Parties, Promised to GAM for Aceh), *Suara Karya*, 22 (August 2000), cited in Hamid, *Partai Politik Lokal di Aceh*, 221.

²⁴Article 1.2.1 of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (Helsinki, 2005).

be nominated by a national party or coalition of national parties. This would allow GAM representatives to contest elections in the absence of a political party of their own. Second, Acehnese would be allowed to form local political parties to contest general (parliamentary) elections at the provincial and district/municipality levels from 2009.²⁵ Because local parties in Aceh would be restricted to provincial and district-level elections, in order to facilitate linkages with national parties, a provision in the UUPA allowed members of local parties to simultaneously join national parties – a controversial issue discussed in more detail below.²⁶

GAM's transition from fighting force to successful political party

Not surprisingly, the Free Aceh Movement's new political party caused controversy as soon as it was launched on 7 July 2007. Determined to maintain the identity of their movement, GAM leaders named their party the 'GAM Party' and retained the flag of the former separatist movement. This caused an outcry among national parties in Jakarta, with some claiming the party name was evidence that GAM was not committed to the unitary state of Indonesia. While the law was inconveniently silent on the issue, GAM leaders appeared to understand that their choice of name and emblem was needlessly provocative. They opted instead to change the name of their party to Aceh Party (*Partai Aceh*), and inserted the new name on the flag in place of 'GAM'. Importantly, however, the unchanged colors and design of the flag remained immediately recognizable to GAM's supporters as well as its former enemies.

While some national politicians remained suspicious about the Aceh Party's goals, others became concerned that the party would institutionalize the cleavages of the conflict era, leading to a perpetuation of the former conflict through the electoral process. In the months before the election there was indeed much evidence to support such a view. At first, the Aceh Party was victim to a series of violent attacks, with evidence suggesting the perpetrators were disgruntled elements within the military and within former anti-GAM militias. The Aceh Party reported that seven of its members and officials were murdered and many of its branch offices vandalized during this period.²⁷

The Aceh Party, too, relied on its networks of combatants to mobilize voters. And some of the party's grassroots activists clearly sought to intimidate their rivals. Some Aceh Party placards were menacing – 'live together or die together', read one such campaign placard.²⁸ Other propaganda portrayed the party as the only legitimate political party in Aceh. Representatives from local and national parties alike claimed that Aceh Party 'troops' had prevented them from campaigning in certain areas (typically former GAM strongholds). One national party claimed that all of its polling station witnesses in one area had been warned not to participate in one area. Political commentators in Banda Aceh also

²⁵GAM's integration into mainstream politics began when former GAM combatant Irwandi Yusuf was elected Governor of Aceh in landmark elections in December 2006. On the 2006 elections see Clark and Palmer, *Peaceful Pilkada, Dubious Democracy*, and Hillman, 'Aceh's Rebels Turn to Ruling'.

²⁶Other regulations governing local political party formation in Aceh is the national Government Regulation No 20/2007 on Local Political Parties in Aceh and the provincial law (Qanun) Aceh No. 3/2008.

²⁷Hillman, 'Aceh's Rebels'.

²⁸Interview with former Minister for Justice and Human Rights, Hasballah M. Saad, Banda Aceh, 16 June 2009.

complained of menacing phone calls from unnamed persons in response to their reports on the Aceh Party.²⁹

Fortunately, Aceh's 2009 parliamentary elections turned out to be peaceful. National and international monitors helped to inspire confidence in the process and a large number of Acehnese turned out to vote (75.31% compared with the national average of 70.99%). In the lead up to the elections, polls anticipated that local parties would do well, but it was unclear how votes would be distributed. The Aceh Party announced its prediction that it would win up to 80% of the vote, but some thought other local parties, especially former GAM ally, the Information Centre for a Referendum on Aceh (*Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh*; SIRA), which had formed its own political party of the same name – the SIRA Party, would also do well. But polling is notoriously unreliable in Aceh where a conflict-weary population is long accustomed to hiding their political preferences.³⁰ Polls in the lead up to the gubernatorial race in 2006, for example, failed to predict Irwandi Yusuf's landslide victory.³¹ In the final tally, the Aceh Party fell short of its high expectations, but nevertheless secured a convincing victory. Despite standing for the first time in elections against 38 national political parties and five other local political parties, the Aceh Party won the provincial, district and municipality legislative elections in a landslide victory. The following table shows the election results for all political parties at the provincial level.

Table 1. April 2009 election results for the Aceh Provincial Legislature (DPRA).

Rank	Party	Votes(%)
1	The Aceh Party (PA)	46.91
2	The Democratic Party (PD)	10.84
3	The Golkar Party (Golkar)	6.63
4	The National Mandate Party (PAN)	3.87
5	The Prosperous and Justice Party (PKS)	3.80
6	The United Development Party (PPP)	3.45
7	The Justice and United Indonesia Party (PKPI)	1.92
8	The Aceh Sovereignty Party (PDA)	1.85
9	The Acehnese People's Independent Aspiration (SIRA)	1.78
10	The Crescent Star Party (PBB)	1.74
11	The Reform Star Party (PBR)	1.72
12	The People's Aceh Party (PRA)	1.70
13	The People's Conscience Party (Hanura)	1.43
14	The National Awakening Party (PKB)	1.41
15	The Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra)	1.32
16	The Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP)	1.01
17	The National People's Concern Party (PPRN)	0.89
18	The Concern for the Nation Functional Party (PKPB)	0.82
19	The United Aceh Party (PBA)	0.77
20	The Patriot Party (Patriot)	0.70

(continued)

²⁹Interview with Fajran Zen, political analyst at the Aceh Institute, Banda Aceh, 16 June 2009.

³⁰Interview with Aceh Party spokesperson Teungku Adnan Beuransyah, Banda Aceh, 5 April 2009.

³¹Hillman, 'Political Parties and Post-Conflict Transition'.

Table 1. (Continued).

Rank	Party	Votes(%)
21	The Ulema National Awakening Party (PKNU)	0.69
22	The Safe and Prosperous Aceh Party (PAAS)	0.52
23	The Indonesian Workers and Employers Party (PPPI)	0.48
24	The Regional Unity Party (PPD)	0.45
25	The National Front Party (Barnas)	0.39
26	The National Sun Party (PMB)	0.34
27	The Prosperous Indonesia Party (PIS)	0.25
28	The Prosperous Peace Party (PDS)	0.24
29	The Democratic Nationhood Party (PDK)	0.24
30	The Democratic Reform Party (PDP)	0.21
31	The Indonesian Youth Party (PPI)	0.19
32	The Sovereignty Party (Kedaulatan)	0.18
33	The Indonesian Democratic Care Party (PKDI)	0.17
34	The Indonesia National People Fortress Party (PNBKI)	0.16
35	The Republika Nusantara Party (Republikan)	0.16
36	The Pioneer Party (Pelopor)	0.15
37	The Indonesian Democracy Upholding Party (PPDI)	0.12
38	The Independent Party (Merdeka)	0.12
39	The Marhaenism Indonesian National Party (PNIM)	0.11
40	The Functional Party of Struggle (PKP)	0.09
41	The United Indonesian Nahdlatul Ummah Party (PPNUI)	0.08
42	The Indonesia Unity Party (PSI)	0.05
43	The Labor Party (Partai Buruh)	0.04
Total		100

Source: KIP Aceh.

National party representatives' responses to the Aceh Party victory

The following section documents and analyses national party responses to the Aceh Party's historic victory. Interview respondents were chosen to represent as wide a spectrum of political views and interests as possible. Leaders of large and small national parties were included as were prominent members of the national legislature. Some respondents were included because of their direct involvement in deliberations on the Law on Governing Aceh (No. 11/2006), which confirmed the rights of Acehnese to form local political parties and in deliberations on the more recent Law on Political Parties (No 2/2008). Papuan members of the Regional Representative Council (DPD) were also included because Papua's Special Autonomy Law carries provisions for the establishment of Papua-based parties even though such laws remain ambiguous and have yet to be implemented.

The following discussion of the implications of the Aceh party's historic victory for ethnic politics and Indonesia's political party system is organized according to the following key themes: (1) views on the establishment of local political parties in Aceh; (2) responses to the Aceh Party victory; (3) the role of local political parties in national politics; (4) mechanisms for integrating local political parties into the party system; (5) prospects for local political parties in other regions; and (6) the ambiguous promise of local political parties for Papua – presently the home of Indonesia's most violent ethnic instability.

On the agreement to allow local political parties in Aceh

During and after the peace negotiations in 2005, national parties were mostly opposed to giving GAM the right to form a local political party. Supported by the general public, the opposition to ethnic Acehnese parties was so strong that it nearly derailed peace negotiations. Many national legislators were concerned that local parties would weaken the political party system, by triggering demands for political parties in other parts of the ethnically diverse nation. According to Irgan Chairul Mahfiz, Secretary General of the United Development Party, 'I am concerned about the weakening position of national parties. The people's emotions support local parties over national parties. I am worried about this in the context of the unitary state.' Other national party leaders reasoned that allowing GAM to form a political party was probably the only viable means of securing a political settlement with the rebels. According to Ferry Mursyidan Baldan, Head of the House's special committee deliberating the new Law on Political Parties, '[those of us] who supported the local party idea argued that distrust toward national parties in Aceh was so great that local parties would be needed to facilitate social and political integration'. Former Minister for Human Rights Hasballah M. Saad concurred:

local parties were essential for the peace to work in Aceh. Because of the high level of distrust toward the centre and the lack of meaningful linkages between GAM and national parties, it was necessary for GAM to have its own party. If GAM was forced to integrate politically through national parties, the conflict would continue.

Other national party leaders reasoned that local parties were acceptable insofar as they were a necessary bargaining tool at a time when the central government was politically and militarily weak and under the international spotlight of post-tsunami recovery. Achmad Mubarak, Deputy Chairman of the Democrat Party – the President's electoral machine – anticipated that local parties in Aceh would only be needed for about 10 years – until the people of Aceh were able to put the conflict behind them. According to the Party Deputy Chair, 'local parties were part of the political bargain in the peace negotiations. One day when the situation in Aceh is more stable and equal with other regions, we may decide that local parties are no longer relevant.' The Secretary General of the United Development Party agreed that local parties for Aceh are only 'temporarily a good solution'.

Golkar Party parliamentarian from Papua, Paskalis Kossay, on the other hand, was less equivocal in his support for local parties in Aceh:

the establishment of local political parties in Aceh is quite normal. It was part of comprehensive efforts for conflict resolution. It is very normal for the country to recognize Aceh people's participation in political development both at local and national level. It is very normal to do so, because it has been demanded by the people of Aceh.

Other parliamentarians voiced qualified support. According to House member Yasonna H. Laoly from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle – the party most strongly opposed to local parties during the peace negotiations,

local parties are fine as long as their basic ideology and reference remain in line with the Constitution and Pancasila.³² Local parties are tolerable as long as they do not violate the

³²PANCASILA is the official ideology of the Indonesian state to which all political parties must commit their allegiance. Its five main tenets are belief in (1) the one and only God, (2)

Constitution. But, we cannot accept them when they go outside these channels. We cannot put this nation at risk. We must not let the local parties be an embryo for ideas that not only violating the spirit of special autonomy, but also threaten the unitary state of Indonesia.

Responses to the Aceh Party's historic victory in the April 2009 elections

The peaceful nature of the 2009 legislative elections in Aceh after much violence in the lead up no doubt brought as much relief to central government officials as it did to the citizens of Aceh. At the same time, the stunning victory of the Aceh party raised alarm bells in Jakarta. The Aceh Party dominated the elections at the provincial and district level to a degree not seen by any political party in Indonesia in any single election since the country's return to democracy in 1999. The Aceh Party won 46.91% of the vote, which translated into 33 seats in the 69-seat provincial legislature. At the sub-provincial level, the party secured absolute majorities in seven out of 23 districts and became the largest political party in a majority of districts and municipalities. The party even polled well in areas outside GAM's strongholds, including the provincial capital Banda Aceh, reflecting widespread local disaffection with national political parties. The one exception was President Bambang Susilo Yudhyono's Democrat Party, which benefited from an alliance with the Aceh Party and from the Acehnese public's appreciation of the President's commitment to securing and maintaining the peace in Aceh since 2005.³³

National party elites generally accepted that the results reflected widespread disaffection in Aceh with national parties. Most accepted that local parties were more trusted by Acehnese than national parties. According to Ganjar Pranowo, Secretary General of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle faction (*fraksi*) in the national parliament, 'I think this is homework for political parties. They must work harder if they want to become big parties trusted by the people'. Other national party leaders complained that local parties had merely exploited anti-Jakarta sentiments without offering anything new. Many saw the Aceh Party's success as unsustainable over the long term. According to senior lawmaker Ferry Mursyidan Baldan,

We should keep in mind that this is the first election in Aceh. Local parties had a better image for promoting local interests. However, the election result now challenges them to prove [their ability to promote local interests]. If the local parties are found not capable, people might think that what matters is not whether the party is local or national, but to what extent a party can promote people's aspiration when they are in parliament.

Democrat Party Deputy Chair Achmad Mubarak expressed similar views:

[t]he result is to be expected because of voters' euphoria over local parties. But we will see how GAM [the Aceh Party] satisfies the public. Some people have already begun to question this. For example, Lhokseumawe's previous mayor Tarmizi was very good, now he has been replaced by a GAM candidate who is not as capable. I do not think the Aceh Party's victory will be permanent. It will last for maybe two terms, or for ten years.

just and civilized humanity, (3) the unity of Indonesia, (4) guided by the inner wisdom of consensus arising from deliberations amongst representatives, and (5) social justice for all Indonesians.

³³Hillman, 'Political Parties and Post-Conflict Transition'.

Local political parties as vehicles for separatism

During deliberations on the Law on Governing Aceh – the legislation that would enact the Helsinki MoU – some lawmakers argued that local parties would serve as a vehicle for continued ethnic separatism in Aceh. These views are supported by recent scholarship that suggests that the existence of regional or ethnic parties is a major variable in the stability of post-conflict political institutions.³⁴ Following the Aceh Party victory, some national party leaders remained skeptical about the Aceh Party's commitment to the unitary state of Indonesia (*Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*, NKRI), while others remained cautiously optimistic. According to Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle lawmaker Yasonna H. Laoly,

[the Aceh Party] win means that Aceh people gave their trust to the local party. I see no problem as long as they remain committed to NKRI, the Law on Political Parties, and the Law on Governing Aceh. But, when they start to promote separatism or other ideas threatening NKRI, we cannot accept that.

Ryaas Rasyid, Chair of the Democratic Nationhood Party, was even more concerned:

I have talked about [the Aceh Party's commitment to NKRI] with the State Intelligent Agency (BIN). I told them that we must continually monitor Aceh, because what we see in Aceh could be the seeds of future separatism. When they [Aceh Party] dominate the province and all of the regencies, they will demand more authority, for example by having their own police or having authority to manage international relations. If these powers are granted, they will be very pleased and this will strengthen the image of Aceh as an autonomous region. But, if these powers are not given, they could demand a referendum [on Aceh's status].

The majority of national party respondents agreed, however, that while the threat of former GAM members using the Aceh Party as a vehicle for furthering separatist ambitions, relations between the party and the central government would need to be closely monitored. According to Papuan lawmaker Paskalis Kossay,

I think Acehnese people only want to be respected. For years they have had no room to express their political and economic rights, so rebellion sprung up everywhere. But, after the reform-era government began to give them more space and respect, things began to cool down. If the state gives its full trust to [Aceh's new government], I don't think that disintegration will happen.

Achmad Mubarak was more confident that Indonesia's new political institutions could accommodate interests in Aceh:

I don't think it's a concern. GAM no longer exists. What exists now is only its ideology. And I don't think its ideology will be dangerous. Indonesians have a wonderful ability to accommodate different culture and Aceh has been a cosmopolitan region since a long time ago. Only under Suharto were the Aceh people deceived.

Senior Acehnese lawmaker Hasballah M. Saad was even more emphatic: 'GAM has made a promise to commit to the unitary state of Indonesia. Because the peace agreement was brokered by the European Union, it would be very difficult for them to go back on their word.'

³⁴Brancati, *Peace by Design*.

Mechanisms for integrating local political parties into the party system

The agreement that Aceh would be allowed to have local political parties was followed by an intense debate among national lawmakers about how local parties would be integrated into the national political party system. GAM leaders had only sought the right for their party to contest local elections (provincial, district and municipality). They were not interested in contesting Aceh's seats in the national parliament. Some national political party leaders worried that the Aceh Party's apparent lack of interest in national politics might lead to Aceh's separation from national political life. Lawmakers decided to use the Law on Local Political Parties to encourage linkages between local and national parties. While the general Law on Political Parties (No. 2/2008) prevents membership of more than one political party, the Law on Governing Aceh – the chief legislation implementing the peace agreement – permits citizens or parliamentarians to join two parties if one party is a local party and the other a national party.³⁵ According to Golkar lawmaker Ferry Mursyidan Baidan, head of the House of Representative's special committee deliberating the Law on Governing Aceh (2006), the 'dual membership' provision was designed to encourage coalition-building and to prevent 'horizontal competition' between local and national parties in local elections. 'We were concerned that national parties would not support local political parties for Aceh without a provision that provided linkages between them and new local parties.'

Unfortunately, inconsistencies between the Law on Governing Aceh and the Law on Political Parties undermined the stated purpose of the provision, which led to tensions.³⁶ The Law on Political Parties, for example, holds that membership of another political party is grounds for dismissal of a party member.³⁷ This gave some national political parties just cause for recalling their candidates in Aceh when they simultaneously joined the Aceh Party or other local parties. Well known Acehnese academic and lawmaker A. Farhan Hamid was a member of the national House of Representatives representing the National mandate Party (PAN) as well as the founder of the local United Aceh Party (PBA). The provincial board of PAN recommended recalling him for his role in establishing the United Aceh Party.

Some national lawmakers were against the dual membership provision. Second-term PDIP lawmaker in House of Representatives and Deputy Chairman of the House special committee for deliberating the 2008 election bill Yasonna H. Laoly, former Minister for Human Rights Hasballah M. Saad and Deputy Speaker of the House of Representatives Priyo Budi Santoso argued that other means for facilitating communication between local and national political parties should be explored. Paskalis Kossay (Golkar) also expressed concern that the dual membership provision would lead to confusion for members. 'Which kind of party do you want to develop – local or national?' he asked, 'During the election which party will you vote for?' Aceh Party secretary and deputy leader Muhammad Yahya was also cool on the idea of dual membership, noting that none of his fellow party members had simultaneously sought membership of a national political party.³⁸ Ganjar Pranowo noted that the coalition between the Aceh Party and the Democrat Party was a 'good

³⁵ Article 83, Law on Governing Aceh (Law No. 11/2006).

³⁶ Hillman, 'Political Parties and Post-Conflict Transition'.

³⁷ Article 16 (1) (c) Law No. 2/2008 on Political Parties.

³⁸ Interview with Aceh Party Secretary M. Yahya, Aceh Party campaign headquarters, Banda Aceh, 17 June 2009.

sign' for Jakarta-Aceh relations. The Democrat Party showed support for Aceh Party candidates in the local elections, while the Aceh Party endorsed Democrat Party candidates for seats in the national parliament. Allowing national and local political parties to form such coalitions might prove to be a more effective means of facilitating relationships between the centre and Aceh than through the politically engineered 'dual membership' provision.

Local parties as vehicles for exacerbating or mitigating ethnic conflict in other regions

One of the arguments against local political parties for Aceh put forward by national party leaders was that it would lead to demands for local parties in other parts of Indonesia. National party leaders expressed concern that this would have the potential to energize identity-based politics in other parts of the country. Scholarly debates are divided on this issue. Brancati, for example, argues that the existence of ethnic or regional parties increases the risk that local political contestants will play the ethnic card in mobilizing political support.³⁹ This can lead to an 'upping of the ante' and increase the risk of violent ethnic conflict. Other scholars have suggested that local political parties can serve as a legitimate vehicle for expressing the political interests of ethnic groups, especially if they are political minorities, and that denying such groups the opportunity poses the even greater risk that such groups will seek to pursue their political goals through violent means.⁴⁰ Indonesia's national party leaders demonstrated an appreciation for these contrasting viewpoints, but most agreed with the former in the case of Aceh. Most national party leaders interviewed argued that the expansion of local political parties in other parts of the archipelago would be an existential threat to Indonesia's national party system and could lead to further ethnic conflict. Many national party figures warned of a return to the political fragmentation and ultimate failure of constitutional democracy in the 1950s when regional and ethnic parties were last allowed to compete for office.

According to Ferry Mursyidan Baldan, a key supporter of local parties in Aceh,

Our system is national system. We are multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious. We do not tolerate the establishment of local parties generally, because this will only create parties based on ethnicity and religion, etc. When it comes to national parties based on religion, we oblige them to declare that they are open parties. They cannot be exclusive. [If we allow local parties in other regions] not only our political system will be destroyed, but more importantly our nation system will also be destroyed. Ethnic sentiment must not be allowed in our system because it will lead to demands to create new regions based on ethnicity.

Achmad Mubarak echoed his views: 'In the context of the unitary state, local parties should not exist. It will be too complicated for our system if we allow local parties in all regions. The problem with Aceh is that there was dissatisfaction. When this is fulfilled, the demand [for local parties] will disappear'. Secretary General of the United Development Party, Irgan Chairul Mahfiz noted that

[l]ocal parties were allowed in Aceh to accommodate demands for independence. The same thing cannot be given to other regions, because that would be very dangerous for

³⁹Brancati, *Peace by Design*.

⁴⁰Reilly, 'Introduction'; Hillman, 'Power Sharing and Political Party Engineering'.

national unity. If this were allowed, the nation would separate into pieces. Our country is not a federal state, but a unitary state. I worry that the country would move toward a federal structure if local parties were allowed nationally ... Local parties tend to promote subjective local interests outside of the national context. This is what we are concerned about. We can see it already in the local executive elections and in the creation of new administrative regions (*pemekaran*). These activities are driven by ethnic, tribal, and religious issues. Take, for example, the demand for regional partition in South Aceh by non-Acehnese groups. Another example is the partition of Gorontalo and North Sulawesi. Gorontalo is dominated by Muslims, while North Sulawesi is dominated by Christians. And the proposed partition of Bangka Belitung from South Sumatera – in South Sumatera the Palembang ethnic group is dominant, while in Bangka Belitung ethnic Malays are dominant.

The alarmist views expressed by these two men are commonly held by national politicians in Jakarta. Interestingly, however, such views are not supported by the facts on the ground. In Aceh, local parties have served as a mechanism for neutralizing separatist ambitions and ensuring that Aceh remained a part of Indonesia. Nor do national politicians' fears appear to reflect the concerns of the wider public. According to one recent electoral survey,⁴¹ less than one per cent of Indonesians believe that ethnic conflict is something they should worry about. While fears of local political parties among national party leaders seem real enough, the reason for their fears might be found in the threat of lost votes than in the threat to Indonesia's constitutional democracy. As one lawmaker admitted confidentially, national party leaders are acutely aware of the public's lack of confidence in national political parties.⁴² The strong performance by the Aceh Party suggests the potential appeal of local political parties in Indonesia, posing a potential threat to national parties' hold on the political system, especially at provincial and district levels.

Can local political parties help to solve the political impasse in Papua and West Papua Provinces?

National party members clearly saw the establishment of local political parties in Aceh as *sui generis*. Powerful national figures vowed to ensure that other regions or ethnic groups would not be afforded the same rights. Deputy Speaker of the national parliament and Chair of Golkar's Legislative and Political Institutions Committee Priyo Budi Santoso was emphatic:

Let [local parties] be a solution for Aceh only. It was a win-win solution at the time. We have no intention to endorse local parties in other regions, because we are the unitary state of Indonesia. We must see all potential risks of allowing local parties in other regions. I personally have no intention of allowing local parties in other regions. We will use all the authority we have in the Golkar faction of the House (DPR).

At the same time, the special political party arrangements for Aceh pose a dilemma for Indonesia's lawmakers in their management of ethnic and political conflict in Papua – a region that has experienced an upsurge in ethnic violence in recent years.⁴³ This is because Papua also enjoys special autonomy status under Indonesian law. Furthermore, Papua's special autonomy law carries provisions for

⁴¹IFES, 'Indonesia Electoral Survey 2010'.

⁴²Pratikno, 'Political Parties in Pilkada'.

⁴³International Crisis Group, 'Radicalisation and Dialogue in Papua'.

the establishment of Papua-based parties. However, the law falls short of specifically endorsing local parties in Papua. Unlike the Law on Governing Aceh, Papua's special autonomy law merely provides for political parties that are headquartered in Papua. Any such party must comply with the Law on Political Parties, which requires it to establish and maintain branches in 60% of the provinces and in 50% of districts and municipalities within those provinces. This means that Papuans can only register political parties if they are *national* political parties. The law was tested in 2007 when the establishment of the Papua People's Awakening Party (*Partai Kebangkitan Rakyat Papua*) was declared. Declaring that the party's goal was to accommodate local aspirations previously repressed under the centralized system of government, Party spokesperson Nason Elabi said that his party's establishment was authorized by the Law on Special Autonomy.⁴⁴

While little has been heard of the Papua People's Awakening Party since the party's founding, increasing levels of violence between indigenous Papuan activists and security forces have highlighted the need for a political solution to the crisis.⁴⁵ So far, the central government has been reluctant to treat the 'Papua problem' as political. The central government prefers to see it as a developmental problem (Papua has among the lowest socio-economic indicators and the highest rates of poverty in Indonesia). The President's response to rising tensions in 2010 was to announce an audit of the way in which special autonomy funds were distributed.⁴⁶ The question as to whether Papuans could be given the same rights to form local political parties as their special autonomy cousins in Aceh has become increasingly important. A recent study by Papuan intellectuals at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia, LIPI) has highlighted the inconsistency of the central government in implementing Aceh and Papua's special autonomy regulations as one of the sources of the conflict. The study also mentions the failure of development, the marginalization of Papuans and violations of human rights as reasons for continued ethnic conflict. The authors draw parallels with Aceh and argue that the problem can only be resolved by dialogue 'along the lines of dialogue that was conducted for Aceh'.⁴⁷ A recent study by the International Crisis Group concurs with this assessment, arguing that the central government must find ways to better accommodate the political aspirations of indigenous Papuans.⁴⁸

While the general view is that the central government is hostile to the idea of expanding political representation for indigenous Papuans either locally or nationally, this study found cautious support for the idea of allowing Papuans to form local political parties. According to Yasonna H. Laoly, Deputy Chair of one of Indonesia's largest secular nationalist parties,

in my opinion, if we allow Aceh to have local parties, it is only fair to allow the same thing in Papua. But it can only be allowed within the confines of the unitary state of Indonesia, meaning that local parties should promote local interests and development and not separatism. They cannot be allowed to plan political activities leading to separatism.

⁴⁴Newspaper *Sinar Harapan* reported the declaration on March 9, 2007, noting that the party was founded by 13 persons.

⁴⁵International Crisis Group, 'Indonesia'.

⁴⁶Abepura, 'Auditing Papua'.

⁴⁷Widjojo, *Papua Road Map*.

⁴⁸International Crisis Group, 'Radicalisation and Dialogue'; 'Indonesia'.

But Yasonna H. Laoly also expressed his hope that national parties could build greater trust in Papua and West Papua so that there would be no need for local political parties to represent the interests of indigenous Papuans. Ganjar Prawono from the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle agreed with this sentiment, suggesting that ‘national parties need to ensure that their structures at the grassroots level can channel public aspirations’.

While many national party leaders agreed that the central government would find it difficult to deny Papuans the right to form their own local political parties, many noted that such a demand did not seem to exist in either Papua or West Papua. According to Irgan Chairul Mahfiz, ‘the central government only half-heartedly allowed Papua to have [political parties]. As the pressure from Papua was not as strong as that from Aceh the government was able to control the issue.’ This reflects the fact that the central government actually does not want local parties, including in Aceh, but the pressure in Aceh was too strong. Papuan representative in the national parliament Paskalis Kossay interprets Papua’s special autonomy law more expansively:

[t]he law on Papua’s special autonomy ... only mentions ‘parties’ not ‘local parties’. But, I think the meaning should be construed as ‘local’ parties. The government is reluctant to bring certainty to this matter. Papua is supposed to have local parties. The situation is similar to that in Aceh. If we truly want Papua to be developed in politics, we must also provide room for Papua to establish local parties that can contest elections like in Aceh. To empower Papuans politically, they must be given this opportunity. So far, however, the demand in Papua is not as strong as that in Aceh. The demand is only from a few elites who did not get places in national parties.

This view was echoed by Paulus Yohanes Sumino, a Papuan member of the Regional Representative Council (*Dewan Perwakilan Daerah*, DPD) – a body that functions like an upper house in the Indonesian parliament:

As of today, no Papuans have officially declared they want to establish a local party. I think [political hopefuls] still try to enter politics through existing national parties. But after the recent [2009] legislative elections, some potential figures in Papua who failed to win seats started to seek positions in the 11 additional seats in Papua’s provincial legislature.⁴⁹ They have appealed to the Supreme Court (*Makamah Konstitusi*, MK) to demand that these 11 seats should be reserved for Papuans’. The Supreme Court rejected the appeal, triggering fresh calls for local parties in Papua. Following the decision, there is now a debate over whether the 11 additional seats should be contested by local parties in Papua. I see no problem with this.

Another Papuan member of the Regional Representative Assembly, Elion Numberi argues that local political parties in Papua are already possible under the law on Papua’s special autonomy. He argues that other laws must now ‘be adjusted with the law on Papua’s special autonomy’. Elion Numberi also accepts, however, that the demand for political parties has not been as strong in Papua as it was in Aceh where the Free Aceh Movement demanded this right as a condition of peace negotiations. Numberi suggests that the reason local parties have yet to emerge in Papua is two-fold. First, ‘establishing a party requires a huge amount of money’.

⁴⁹Based on standard population criteria, the Papuan provincial legislature should have 45 seats. The Law on Special Autonomy added 11 more seats in a bid to increase opportunities for representation by native Papuans.

Second, there is a 'lack of awareness about local parties in Papua. Most native Papuans live in mountainous areas and they do not really understand political parties'.

The question remains, however, how central authorities will react should indigenous Papuans more forcefully demand the right to establish local political parties. The legality of such an option will need to be clarified, ideally as part of a wholesale review of special autonomy arrangements for Papua and West Papua. National party leaders and lawmakers, especially indigenous Papuans, generally agree that more extensive dialogue is needed between the central government and indigenous Papuans. At the same time, national leaders express frustration over the lack of representative dialogue partners – i.e. given the diversity of Papuan communities, it is difficult for any one local group to articulate or represent local interests. Dialogue is also complicated by the fact that some groups in Papua continue to advocate for independence. For this reason, even the mention of 'dialogue' has been rejected by some quarters for giving some legitimacy to separatist groups.⁵⁰ At the same time, however, Papuan militant groups such as the West Papua National Committee (*Komite Nasional Papua Barat*, KNPB) and the free Papua Movement (*Organisasi Papua Merdeka*, OPM) do not have the strength to force the Indonesian government to the negotiating table in the same way that GAM was able to between 2000 and 2005. That said, the successful creation of local political parties in Aceh to aggregate and articulate local interests in the context of special autonomy might nevertheless be considered as a model for Papua. While Papua's diversity and its lack of a large-scale pan-Papuan movement akin to the former Free Aceh Movement in Aceh would likely preclude the emergence of one dominant local party, multiple local political parties might give voice to more moderate voices in Papua, especially those Papuans who are interested to find accommodation within the unitary state of Indonesia. This, however, would first require the central government to acknowledge that grievances in Papua are political and not solely related to the slow pace of development and misuse of autonomy funds.

National party leaders generally raise two arguments against the introduction of local political parties in Papua. The first argument is that by allowing political parties in Papua, the central government would be opening the floodgates for other regions – i.e. Aceh would no longer be a special case. The second argument is that local political parties would likely become vehicles for separatism – e.g. local political parties could promote a referendum on independence. Neither of these arguments stands up to close scrutiny. First, the floodgates argument overlooks the fact that, like Aceh, Papua and West Papua are, at least in theory, already subject to special autonomy arrangements. Local political parties could be permitted to contest elections in special autonomous regions in Indonesia without extending such a right to other regions. Second, while there is certainly evidence around the globe of local parties serving as vehicles for ethnic exclusivity and separatism, laws and institutions can be designed to prevent such a danger. Aceh is case in point. The Law on Local Political Parties requires that parties declare their commitment to the unitary state of Indonesia. Any contrary activities would be cause for deregistration of the party. Other laws already require political parties to adopt Pancasila – the state's guiding

⁵⁰Widjojo, *Papua Road Map*.

ideology, which includes commitment to the unitary state of Indonesia.⁵¹ In fact, since the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in 1998, reformers have proven adept at minimizing incentives for politicians to use ethnicity as a source of political mobilization in the country's new multiparty democratic system.

Concluding comments

While Indonesia's national party leaders expressed a range of different views and reactions to the emergence of local political parties in Aceh and the victory of the Aceh Party in legislative elections, a number of conclusions can be drawn from their responses. These findings provide clues as to the possible future of local political parties in Indonesia's political party system. National party leaders supported the decision to allow local political parties in Aceh largely because they considered it necessary for securing a peace agreement with the Free Aceh Movement. A few also saw the move as a necessary or desirable mechanism for transforming the Free Aceh Movement from a militant separatist group into a political movement, thus facilitating the group's integration into mainstream politics. While the peaceful outcome and transition of power in Aceh following the 2009 legislative elections lend support to such views, many continue to consider local parties in Aceh to be a necessary 'evil' that they expect will disappear as a political force in the future. Some doubted that the Aceh Party would continue to attract votes once the initial euphoria dissipated, with one respondent predicting the party would maintain its dominance in local legislatures for two terms (10 years) at best. One predicted that local parties would eventually fade away once people realized they were not better at delivering public goods than national parties. However, the further success of the Aceh Party's candidates at April 2012 gubernatorial elections demonstrates the party's continued organizational strength and popular support.⁵²

National party leaders' general aversion to local or ethnic political parties remained largely unchanged by the 2009 election results in Aceh. Among the national party leaders interviewed as part of this study, the only enthusiastic advocate of local parties was himself a member of a small national party vulnerable to Indonesia's onerous cross-national regulations on political party registration. National party leaders generally agreed that Aceh was a special case and that local parties should be prohibited in other regions. National party leaders expressed concern that if local parties were permitted more generally, this would lead to a rise in identity-based politics and regionalism that would tear at the fabric of Indonesia's body politic. Some respondents expressed a view that local parties belonged to a federal political system, which is anathema to contemporary Indonesian nationalism. Because 'federalism' is associated with the centrifugal forces that undermined constitutional democracy in the 1950s, the term has become akin to a profanity in Indonesian politics. Indeed, many expressed alarmist views about the relationship between local political parties and national political disintegration, but the Aceh

⁵¹See note 32 above.

⁵²The Aceh Party candidate pair Zaini Abdullah and Muzakkir Manaf won 55.87% of the vote in the April 2012 polls to unseat the incumbent governor Irwandi Yusuf. However, Irwandi Yusuf retained a strong following (29.18% of the vote), especially among the younger generation of ex-combatants. Following his electoral defeat, Irwandi Yusuf established a new local political party – the National Aceh Party (*Partai Nasional Aceh*), which will compete against the Aceh Party in future elections.

experience to date does not justify such alarmism. A more palpable threat, as some national politicians privately acknowledge, is the potential popularity of local political parties – the risk that voters would desert national parties in droves if given a local option. While such hypotheses cannot be easily tested, the success of the Aceh Party in the 2009 elections, albeit borne of specific historical circumstances, suggests the potential appeal of local political parties, especially in peripheral regions that have been neglected by the center.

Despite general opposition to national parties, national political party leaders generally agreed that Papua might also be considered a special case. Because local parties are permitted in Aceh in accordance with special autonomy laws, when pressed, even national party leaders from nationalist end of the spectrum agreed that it would be difficult to deny Papuans the same right if Papua's special autonomy were to be reviewed. While Papua's special autonomy law does not actually permit local political parties, the sentiment expressed by respondents suggests that the law could be amended if the demand from Papua arose. While Papuan lawmakers acknowledged, however, that there were presently no such demands, the Aceh Party victory has already begun to stimulate debate on the subject in the province. While Aceh's social and political history has been very different to that of Papua at the opposite end of the vast Indonesian archipelago, its successful experiment with local political parties might serve as a model for breaking the impasse in Papua. Given rising militancy and separatism and increased levels of violence in Papua in recent years – a manifestation of the failure of current political arrangements, local political parties might provide a productive channel for communication and dialogue. At the very least, it would provide an alternative to militancy for Papuan indigenous rights activists.

Overall, the experiment with local political parties in Aceh must be considered a success, and an important milestone in Indonesia's democratization. While critics argue that local parties are a threat to the nation because of their potential to serve as vehicles for separatism and ethnic conflict, the Aceh experience has demonstrated the opposite to be the case – that local political parties can be used to counter separatism and to reduce ethnic identity-based conflict. The Aceh case also shows how legal provisions governing the establishment and operations of political parties can be used to ensure that local political parties do not pursue separatism or ethnic exclusiveness. While it is unlikely that the central government will pass laws allowing local political parties to contest elections in other parts of Indonesia anytime soon, central lawmakers' reasons for denying Indonesian voters this option will need to be rethought.

Notes on contributor

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