

**Asia Research Institute
Working Paper Series No. 137
Aceh Working Paper Series No. 6**

**Dividing Aceh?
Minorities, Partition Movements
and State-Reform in Aceh Province**

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May 2010



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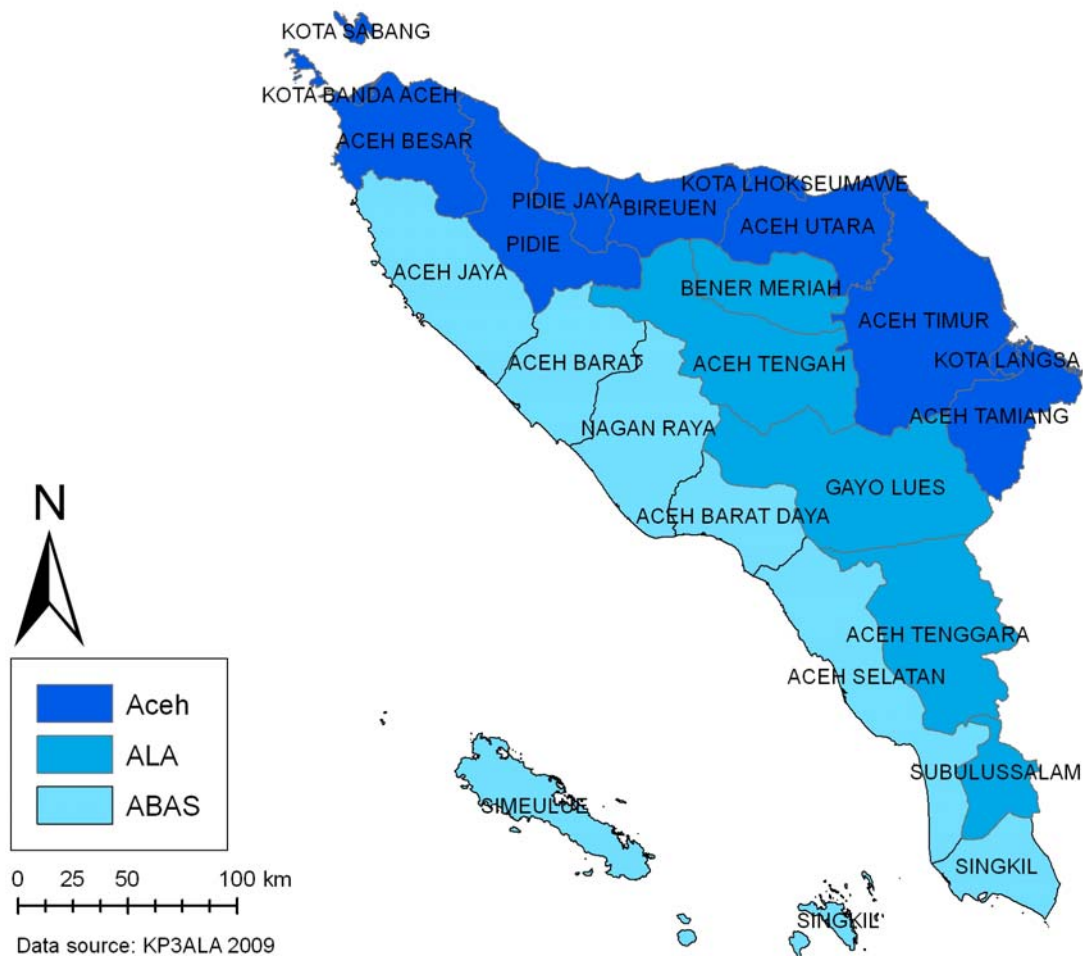
The Asia Research Institute (ARI) was established as a university-level institute in July 2001 as one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore (NUS). The mission of the Institute is to provide a world-class focus and resource for research on the Asian region, located at one of its communications hubs. ARI engages the social sciences broadly defined, and especially interdisciplinary frontiers between and beyond disciplines. Through frequent provision of short-term research appointments it seeks to be a place of encounters between the region and the world. Within NUS it works particularly with the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Business, Law and Design, to support conferences, lectures, and graduate study at the highest level.

INTRODUCTION: ACEH AND THE ALA AND ABAS-MOVEMENTS

Aceh is the northernmost province on the island of Sumatra and in recent decades has been the scene of considerable conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the central government in Jakarta. An earlier rebellion in the name of regional autonomy and the protection of Islam had been seen in 1952-1962. GAM was established in 1976 and enjoyed increasing popular support due to wide dissatisfaction over Jakarta's failure to grant some degree of autonomy to Aceh and share the benefits of the extraction of Aceh's oil and natural gas. Increasing military and political repression during the 80s and 90s reinforced popular resentment against the central government and support for GAM's struggle for self-government in Aceh. Various autonomy arrangements failed, such as the 1999 Law on the Implementation of the Special Nature of the Province of Aceh and the 2001 Special Autonomy Law for Aceh. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami brought massive devastation to Aceh and helped trigger a peace agreement in the form of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the central government and GAM on August 15, 2005. The MoU provides for Aceh's special autonomy, as opposed to the self-government GAM had been seeking. Aceh's special autonomy was subsequently elaborated in the Law on the Governance of Aceh (LoGA) adopted in 2006. GAM successfully transformed itself into a political party, Partai Aceh. Irwandi Yusuf, whose support base consists largely of ex-GAM members, won elections for provincial governor held in 2006.

Aceh's population consists of a majority of ethnic Acehnese as well as much smaller groups of mostly indigenous minorities such as Gayo, Alas, Singkil, Kluet, Batak, Tamiang and Aneuk Jamé as well as a significant population of Javanese transmigrants. Around the year 2000, a movement emerged in Aceh's central highland districts of Aceh Tengah, Aceh Tenggara and Aceh Singkil that advocated for the creation of a new province to be called 'Aceh Leuser Antara' (ALA). Indonesia's decentralization framework allows for the partition of districts and provinces, often referred to as 'pemekaran' ('blossoming') and the respective provisions have been used in a great number of cases. Between 1999 and 2007 alone, 153 new districts/cities and seven new provinces were established. The ALA-movement initially consisted of a small number of district leaders, ulamas, students and civil society representatives and called itself the GALAKSI movement, an acronym for Aceh's main highland minority groups Gayo, Alas, Kluet and Singkil. This movement, which was later renamed Aceh Leuser Antara (ALA), was joined a few years later by a similar movement advocating for the creation of a new province (Aceh Barat Selatan, ABAS) along Aceh's west coast, covering the districts of Aceh Jaya, Aceh Barat, Nagan Raya, Aceh Barat Daya, Simeulue and Aceh Selatan. The ALA and ABAS movements caused anxiety in Aceh during the drafting of the LoGA, when the question arose whether or not the final version would provide for the possibility of partitioning Aceh. The inclusion of such a reference was seen by observers as potentially undermining the entire peace process in Aceh, which is based on the premise of a single territory (ICG, 2005: 10).

Aceh if ALA and ABAS Provinces Were Created



The issue came to the forefront of Aceh politics when ALA and ABAS supporters held a rally in Jakarta on 4 December 2005 to mark the “declaration” of their respective provinces. The twelve districts involved in the ALA and ABAS movements challenged the provincial government to insert a provision stating that the territory of Aceh “*consists of several provinces which would have special authority as autonomous regions*” or else they would “*secede*” from Aceh and hand administration of their districts to the central government (ICG, 2005: 10). They also threatened to boycott the election provided for in the law. The final draft of the LoGA adopted in 2006 established the boundaries of Aceh consistent with the 1 July 1956 borders and by doing so, appeared to exclude the possibility of a future division of Aceh. After a period of relative calm, the ALA and ABAS movements reappeared at the forefront of Aceh politics in the run-up to the April 2009 elections. Pro-ALA banners were put up prominently in many locations in highland districts. In March 2008, 430 village heads from Aceh’s highland districts demonstrated in Jakarta and in April, 300 village heads from Bener Meriah District threatened to boycott the 2009 elections. This was the backdrop of a massacre of five men in Aceh Tengah which involved the largest loss of life in a single conflict since

the Helsinki MoU and was linked by many, including the governor, to the ALA/ABAS issue. It was described by some observers as “*the most serious blow so far*” to the peace process and sparked widespread concern about its future, though spillovers were contained quickly (World Bank, 2008: 1). ALA and ABAS movements are seen by many observers as a test of Aceh’s social cohesion, underlining the need for a full and timely implementation of the MoU and the LoGA. The potential impact on peace stems from the possibility of exacerbation of disagreements over the interpretation and implementation of the MoU and the LoGA, relating specifically to the definition of Aceh’s borders and the extent to which the provincial government must be involved in Jakarta’s decisions regarding Aceh.

The unique set of ethnic, political and socioeconomic grievances that resulted in the formation of the ALA and ABAS movement remains poorly understood. This paper analyzes the status of these movements as well as the underlying grievances, their political dynamics and their implications for peace, development and governance reform in the province. The paper is based on relevant literature as well as interviews and group discussions with officials at the district, sub-district and village level, officials in various political parties, ALA leaders, villagers, local activists and NGO staff in Bener Meria, Aceh Tengah, Gayo Lues, Aceh Tenggara, Subulussalam, Aceh Barat and in the provincial capital undertaken in November 2009. The paper aims at developing, in light of international best practices related to minority accommodation, recommendations for increasing the capacity of local governance to address the grievances in highland districts and to accommodate the legitimate interests of minorities within the context of governance reform. The first part of this paper describes the partition movements’ place in the larger picture of Aceh-Jakarta relations and the legal framework and implementation experience pertaining to the creation of new regions. Following a short account of the current status of Aceh’s partition movements, various arguments put forward by ALA and ABAS advocates and their plausibility will be analyzed. Finally, recommendations will be given for how the provincial government can more effectively address both the partition movements and the grievances underlying them.

ACEH’S PARTITION MOVEMENTS AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO JAKARTA AND GAM

The significance of the ALA and ABAS movements cannot be understood without reference to Aceh’s decades-long conflict and the wider relationship between Aceh Province and the central government in Jakarta. There is considerable overlap between the institutions, elites, regions and ethnicities who opposed independence during the conflict and who support the creation of new provinces today. Specifically, many leaders of the ALA and ABAS movements were also leaders of militias which were supported by the Indonesian military and fought against GAM (Grayman, 2008). In Bener Meriah, for example, the leader of the ALA campaign is also a leader of the anti-GAM front set up during the military emergency (ICG, 2006: 6). During the conflict, Jakarta tried to split off those parts of Aceh that did not support GAM and many in Aceh consider Jakarta’s support for contemporary partition movements as a continuation of this strategy, with the objective to weaken GAM and to reward areas where GAM support was low (ICG, 2005: 11). Some even consider ALA and ABAS as part of a strategy on the part of the Indonesian military to prepare for the continuation of conflict. On this view, the military supports the creation of a new province because this province would have a leadership loyal to Jakarta as well as its own security apparatus which would ensure that any Aceh independence movement would be unable to

retreat into the highlands. It would also substantially reduce the territory of any future state of Aceh.

While GAM and various provincial governments responded with hostility to the ALA and ABAS movements, the central government and various nationalist political parties in Jakarta, such as Golkar, the ruling party during Suharto's regime and Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party – Struggle (PDI-P), were initially sympathetic, even though this did not translate into direct support. In July 2001, GALAKSI leaders were warmly received by senior political leaders in Jakarta, including president Megawati Sukarnoputri. Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, then Coordinating Minister of Political and Security Affairs, flew to Takengon, the proposed capital of ALA, to reward GALAKSI advocates for their loyalty to the central government with promises of development projects in highland districts (Miller, 2009: 143). Miller attributes the Megawati government's sympathetic response to GALAKSI in the early 2000s to its suspicion of a special autonomy solution to the Aceh conflict (2009: 143-45). Various nationalist parties considered the MoU as compromising Indonesian unity by being overly accommodating of GAM. Supporting ALA and ABAS against strong GAM opposition allowed the leaders of these parties to present themselves as the real defenders of the unity of the Indonesian state. These groups were likely to lose considerably in Aceh in the 2009 elections and advocating on behalf of provincial partition was likely to enhance their success at least in some areas (Gale, 2008). Eight of ten other groups in the national parliament were also supportive. Ex-president Megawati Sukarnoputri received a group of village heads from ALA and ABAS and expressed her support for Aceh's partition during a seminar entitled "*Focus on Aceh's Future: The Establishment of ALA/ABAS as a Solution*".

The ALA and ABAS movements received a major boost in January 2008, when a draft law recommending the creation of ALA and ABAS was introduced to parliament. This move was met by widespread opposition in Aceh, including by the GAM, the governor, members the provincial parliament and civil society. However, ALA/ABAS movements were set back due to the failure of the draft law to be included into the DPR's 2008 agenda, limiting short-term odds for success.

Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono won presidential elections in October 2004. He described the MoU as major success and stated on several occasions that he does not support a partition of Aceh Province (ICG, 2005: 10). He repeatedly called for a moratorium on administrative partition initiatives and in August 2008, issued a decree postponing the proposal to divide Aceh until after the elections in April 2009 (ICG, 2008: 6). Observers consider it unlikely that President Yudhoyono would support a law that would threaten the peace process he had some involvement in initiating.

In contrast to the central government in Jakarta, successive provincial governors in Aceh as well as GAM opposed ALA and ABAS from the outset. The ALA-movement has infuriated many in Aceh who consider Aceh as a single political unit with a distinct history. If the province were to be partitioned, Aceh would lose eleven of its 21 districts and municipalities. As one International Crisis Group report puts it: "*Nothing could alienate the Acehnese heartland more than a split or so convince GAM of the central government's bad faith*" (ICG, 2008: 8). The governor, along with representatives of various local parties, has repeatedly and sharply expressed his opposition to partition. The demand of highland district leaders for a new province, and the bluntness with which it was articulated, has been perceived to be unacceptable and insulting by the provincial government. Among other statements, governor Irwandi Yusuf was quoted as saying that "*Aceh has existed for 700 years ... It is not going to*

be broken up on my watch” (ICG 2008 7) and that “*I know who is behind that, dirty brains altogether, people who are against the peace process*” (Zain, 2008: 21). GAM leaders widely consider the emergence of ALA and ABAS movements as a divide-and-rule tactic by the central government and a deliberate attempt by local and national elites to derail Aceh’s fragile peace process and to regain grounds lost during the 2006 elections (World Bank, 2008: 4).

This suspicion was reinforced by similarities to the division of Papua. A 2003 presidential decree to divide Papua was widely seen to stem from the Megawati government’s determination to weaken the independence movement there (ICG, 2003a, Timmer, 2005). The government of the newly created province West Irian Jaya argued that it was not bound by the Special Autonomy Law, because it only applies to Papua. On the same grounds, a future ALA or ABAS government might argue that it is not bound by the Helsinki agreement (ICG, 2005: 10). During the drafting of LoGA, Home Affairs Minister Ma’aruf told the parliament’s commission II that, although it was not the right time to divide Aceh, it might be appropriate to include provincial partition as “*the Papua special autonomy law also includes regulations on forming new autonomous regions*” (quoted in: ICG, 2005: 8). Megawati, too, explicitly linked her support for ALA and ABAS to her decision to divide Papua into three provinces, arguing that partition would strengthen the unitary state of Indonesia (ICG, 2008: 7).

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING NEW REGION CREATION

LoGA’s article three defines the borders of “Aceh Region” as adjacent with the Straits of Malacca, the Indonesian Ocean and the Province of North Sumatra. This demarcation clearly includes those districts that aspire to forming separate provinces and would appear to exclude the possibility of provincial level partition. However, LoGA’s paragraph five states that the “*establishment, dissolution and amalgamation of regions shall be conducted in accordance with prevailing laws and regulations*”. There is argument about the hierarchy of LoGA on one hand and prevailing laws and regulations on the other (compare, for example, Zain, 2008), leading to a situation in which the partition of Aceh is considered by proponents as well as opponents as a possibility. This stems in part from the unclear provisions of LoGA and in part from the fact that political considerations have been on top of legal and technical requirements in most pemekaran cases. One major review of decentralization reforms in Indonesia found that “*in Aceh, it is not clear where the larger legal framework still applies and where these provisions are trumped by provisions of special status/autonomy. All of the provisions of Law 32/2004 on regional government apply to the special regions, as long as they are not superseded by laws specifying the special regional status, but most of the required legal instruments called for in LoGA have not been adopted*” (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 72). Ferrazzi notes that the LoGA does not have any provisions for the treatment of provincial and district/city level territorial changes and that this suggests that prevailing laws are applicable and “*that special autonomy does not include special powers with respect to territorial changes*” (Ferrazzi, 2007b: 10). He goes on to note that this might be dangerous, because some local interests aiming at partition in hopes of a favorable central level response “*would be encouraged by rules that would deny ... Aceh the right to reject these movements with any finality – the final word would come from national level actors. This is a recipe for conflict*” (Ferrazzi, 2007b: 10).

Pemekaran in Indonesia is currently regulated by Law 32/2004 and Government Regulation 78/2007. Regulation 78/2007, as its predecessors, lays out a detailed and lengthy procedure to verify the suitability for the creation of a new region, involving all levels of government. This assessment includes a wide range of issues, including economic, financial, socio-cultural, political, population, geographic area, security and span of control, which are elaborated as 35 technical indicators and given scores against benchmarks and assigned relative weights. Scores are added and the sum is compared against a set of thresholds in comparison to neighboring regions. Regulation 78/2000 requires that a province must be at least ten years old in order to qualify for splitting and that any province must have five times the average population of districts/cities of adjacent provinces and must have at least five districts/cities. Furthermore, the Governor and the provincial parliament (DPRD) must have agreed to the splitting. However, the regulation is unclear as to the order and finality of the decisions of the Governor and the provincial parliament (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 31).

This methodology for determining whether a new region is justified is quite similar to that seen in the former regulation (GR 129/2000), which has been deemed to be fundamentally flawed. Indicators are too numerous and, more importantly, have little to do with a sound judgment on the viability and potential of a newly created government unit (Ferrazzi, 2007b: 16). Also the summative methodology that gives the false appearance of a scientific approach is considered to be flawed. It encourages poor decisions and data manipulation (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 28). There is great correlation between indicators in each category but more importantly, these indicators create perverse incentives, such as by punishing regions for good performance or for favorable conditions, as Ferrazzi demonstrates (Ferrazzi, 2007b: 16). The process has many decision points along the way up to the Minister but it does not give the public a direct voice and it is unclear as to whether anyone has the power to stop the process (Ferrazzi, 2007b: 9). Dissolution or merger of regions is discussed only as a punitive measure for regions that are deemed incapable of undertaking their autonomous roles. Left out of regulations are financial incentives, which are embedded in the equalization fund (DAU), revenue sharing (DBH) and special funds provided for the transition phase (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 31).

More problematic yet than methodological flaws in the evaluation process of pemekaran proposals is that this process is only selectively applied. The procedures of Law 32/2004 and Government Regulation 78/2007 require prior agreement from the originating region, technical evaluation by the Regional Autonomy Advisory Board (DPOD), endorsement by the President and adoption of the respective law by parliament. But regions can also be created by parliamentary initiative, which largely bypasses the potential opposition from the originating regions and the executive (Fitriani et al., 2005: 7). The approval process in practice has been primarily political, involving heavily the national parliament with only a marginal role for executive branch institutions (Ferrazzi, 2007a: 4). DPOD is seen as making few efforts to seriously scrutinize proposals and objections are difficult to address in the context of the political support found in the national parliament, which is keen to be seen as responsive to local aspirations (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 30). As a result, proposals are often directed to national legislative assemblies who consult little with the executive side. Moreover, the ability of proposing parties to pay off legislators is widely considered to have more weight than the merits of the proposal. As one International Crisis Group (ICG) report puts it “*corruption plays a major role and genuine evaluations of viability ... often lose out to money paid over and under the table to parties involved in the review process ... Jakarta has worried more about procedure than viability, and some would-be Bupatis have effectively*

bribed their resource-poor districts into existence” (ICG, 2007b: 3-4)¹. Four of the five new provinces that were created until 2004 were created by parliamentary initiative and West Papua was created by a law submitted by the Government (Fitriani et al., 2005: 9). In the January 2003 round of pemekaran approvals, seventeen out of the 25 would-be districts benefited from the DPR exercising its right of initiative (ICG, 2003b: 4). While most observers consider it undesirable that proposals can largely bypass scrutiny via the Parliament’s right of initiative, it remains unclear if and how this right can be limited by prior laws that lay out the process and criteria (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 34).

PEMEKARAN IMPLEMENTATION EXPERIENCE

There has not been any systematic evaluation of the success of pemekaran at the province-level but much of what is available on district-level partition is plausibly relevant for the creation of new provinces as well. A study undertaken in 2008 found that, five years into the process, new autonomous regions still generally lagged behind and demonstrated lower levels of performance compared to other regions, not least due to the ineffective use of funds, lack and low qualification of regional government personnel for providing public services (BAPPENAS/UNDP, 2008: 13). According to the vice-chairman of Parliament Commission II, 76 per cent of all regions produced by pemekaran are worse off after the split than before (ICG, 2007b: 3). Specifically, new regions perform more poorly on economic growth than other regions and have generally not managed to close the poverty gap with their parent regions (BAPPENAS/UNDP, 2008: 20). Regional budgets in newly divided regions play a less effective role in stimulating economic activity compared to other regions. Citizens in new regions are less satisfied with public health, public education and administrative services than citizens in other regions (DSF, 2007: 20). New regions were far less likely than other regions to have a poverty reduction program in place or involve communities in planning (DSF, 2007: 62). District-level partition also increases inequality in terms of human development within provinces (Aloysius Gunadi, 2008: 8). Taken together, the benefits of pemekaran are negligible (DSF, 2007: 61).

While pemekaran produces little benefits, it comes at great cost to the central government and the regions, as resources allocated to pemekaran are not available for service improvements (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 30). According to one study, investments in public services by 2007 were at least Rp 76 trillion lower than they would have been in a scenario without pemekaran. In addition, central government expenditure increased by an unknown amount to finance the construction and maintenance of offices in new regions in support of centralized tasks (DSF, 2007: 61). Most of the cost of pemekaran was caused by a reduction in development expenditure by the regions, due specifically to two effects. Firstly, government of originating regions do not reduce routine expenditure in line with the smaller populations they have to serve and spent less on development. Secondly, the revenues of other regions are lower and these regions spent less on development expenditure than would be the case without pemekaran (DSF, 2007: 1). The negative consequences of pemekaran are less visible than the advantages, but they affect more people, not least through higher per capita costs of government, a reduced capacity to adequately discharge the functions that are assigned uniformly to all regions and increased potential for inter-group conflict (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 28). Accordingly, a study undertaken in 2007 concludes that the *“cost of pemekaran is far higher than the associated benefits. For this reason it is recommended that the Government*

¹ For one particularly drastic case, see (Cohen, 2003).

discourages the establishment of new regions and encourages the merger of existing regions” (DSF, 2007: 2).

ASSESSING THE PLAUSIBILITY OF DIVIDING ACEH BY POPULATION SIZE

As with many other pemekaran cases, the proposals to establish ALA and ABAS provinces have not been systematically scrutinized along the lines of the procedures of Law 32/2004 and Government Regulation 78/2007. Indeed the official criteria do not appear to be part of the ALA/ABAS discussion in Aceh, which speaks to the low relevance of the formal procedure in practice.

The appropriate size of an administrative unit, and therefore, the appropriateness of dividing administrative units, cannot be determined a priori and depends heavily on the functions that are to be carried out at the respective level, as well as the role of that level in the larger governance framework. International experience indicates that population size is the most plausible proxy in deciding the plausibility and feasibility of territorial adjustments (Ferrazzi, 2007a: 20). Regulation 78/2000 does not mandate an absolute population threshold for the creation of new provinces. However, it requires that a province must have at least five times the average population of districts/cities of adjacent provinces. By this measure, ALA and ABAS clearly do not qualify. Based on the 2005 census in Aceh, ALA would have about 654,000 and ABAS about 714,000 inhabitants. North Sumatra, the only province bordering Aceh, has 25 districts and cities and the 2000 census recorded a population of 11,48 million, thus the average district/city in North Sumatra has about 459,000 inhabitants. By the standard of regulation 78/2007, ALA and ABAS would need about three times their current populations in order to qualify for the creation of new provinces,

There is increasing recognition at the national level that the creation of new regions might be impeding governance reform and there is increasing pressure to limit future partition initiatives, at least until a systematic assessment allows to judge the effect and success of past initiatives (BAPPENAS/UNDP, 2008). A total population threshold is one of the measures proposed to put a brake on new region creation. As with population in relation to neighboring provinces, ALA and ABAS are unlikely candidates if total population is used to judge viability. There is great variety in the population size of Indonesia’s provinces and districts. The largest province is West Java with nearly 36 million people and the smallest is Gorontalo with little more than 800,000 inhabitants. The mean-sized Indonesian province has about 6,7 million inhabitants, about ten times the population of either ALA or ABAS. If they were created, ALA and ABAS would become Indonesia’s least populated provinces. If the interest is to limit the creation of new provinces, and if population size is a useful indicator to judge the viability of new provinces, then it would be implausible to create ALA and ABAS provinces. In terms of population size, ALA and ABAS are much closer to the average Indonesian district than to that of a province. Many of Indonesia’s districts have much greater populations than ALA or ABAS Provinces would have, with the largest district, Bandung, having 4,1 million inhabitants. There are ten districts with more than two million inhabitants. The mean-sized district in 2001 with 581,000 inhabitants is in the same range as ALA and ABAS Provinces would be, though due to pemekaran, the mean-sized district has dropped to 267,000 inhabitants in 2009 (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 28). The fact that ALA and ABAS are unlikely candidates by most going measures yet have at times received enthusiastic support in Jakarta underlines that at least in these cases, pemekaran is not about the state’s development aims but purely about politics.

CURRENT STATUS OF ALA AND ABAS: MOMENTUM LOST BUT PROBLEMS REMAIN

In light of above discussion, the following sections analyze the current status of ALA and ABAS movements in light of consultations with district officials, community leaders, civil society representatives and villagers undertaken in September 2009 in the districts of Aceh Tengah, Bener Meriah, Gayo Lues, Aceh Tenggara, Aceh Subulussalam and Aceh Barat. The focus here is on ALA, rather than ABAS, because the ALA movement emerged considerably earlier than ABAS and because the aspiration and movement to form ALA province is much stronger than is the case with ABAS (Grayman, 2008). Generally, the ALA movement appears to have lost much of the considerable momentum it had at its height between the elaboration of LoGA and the elections in 2009. This can be attributed to a number of factors. Jakarta saw the opportunity to keep ALA as part of Indonesia when there was still a credible possibility of Aceh gaining independence. District elites utilized this opportunity to mobilize a considerable movement. Weaker support from Jakarta then meant shrinking chances of success which led district leaders to soften their stance on the issue, such as in the cases of the bupati of Aceh Tengah and Gayo Lues. The bupati of Aceh Tenggara was replaced, the leading ALA figure in Subulussalam has died and the bupati in Singkil, who was among the supporters of the first hour, is in ill health. Among bupati in prospective ALA districts, only those in Bener Meriah and Subulussalam continue to actively advocate for partition. Moreover, president Yudhoyono has put all pemekaran proposals on hold prior to presidential elections and the overwhelming electoral support he received in Aceh in the 2009 presidential elections makes it even less likely that he would support partition of Aceh in the future. However, after the election, the president has asked parliament to proceed with partition proposals, of which many ALA leaders are aware.

As Miller points out, the strength of the ALA movement is in part a function of the region's security and economic prospects within Aceh (Miller, 2009: 144). The signing of the MoU and the adoption of LoGA have translated into overwhelming security improvements and substantial financial windfalls, from which pemekaran would cut off the respective districts. Indeed virtually all respondents in the highlands felt that their actual situation has improved since the signing of the MoU. Also the strengthening of the requirement of provincial consent for partition is seen by many ALA-advocates as having weakened partition movements in Aceh. However, the finality of the provincial Governor's and Parliament's decisions remains in doubt and the possibility of pemekaran through the national Parliament's initiative right remains. Moreover, the genuine problems and grievances among highland communities that the ALA and ABAS movements tap into have not been effectively addressed. A different constellation of power at the central level or a change in the security and economic environment in Aceh might return ALA and ABAS as forceful movements again. There is still determined support for provincial partition among the respective district elites and there is also wide support among community members, although much more passive and reluctant. ALA leaders have been remarkably effective in socializing their messages, not least by using kinship-based systems of political organization as well as the hierarchy of the state, especially village leaders, for their advocacy. Indeed it is striking how openly and explicitly ALA-advocates challenge the authority of the provincial government in which most of them are officials, how effectively they use the infrastructure of the very state they are opposing for their advocacy and also that there are no institutions or prominent individuals in the ALA region openly opposing the creation of a new province. Also remarkable is the uniformity of arguments and even wordings used by ALA advocates in different districts, which suggests a considerable level of coordination. Many ALA-leaders present their demands in very urgent

and categorical terms, highlighting that there can be no solution to the problems they raise short of partition. They have convinced many people that people in highland districts are deeply and systematically disadvantaged that the creation of a new province would effectively remedy this situation. Most respondents in the highlands, including opponents, felt that a majority of residents in the respective district would support pemekaran if a referendum were to take place. Even many opponents of ALA in highland districts expect partition to happen unless the underlying grievances are effectively addressed.

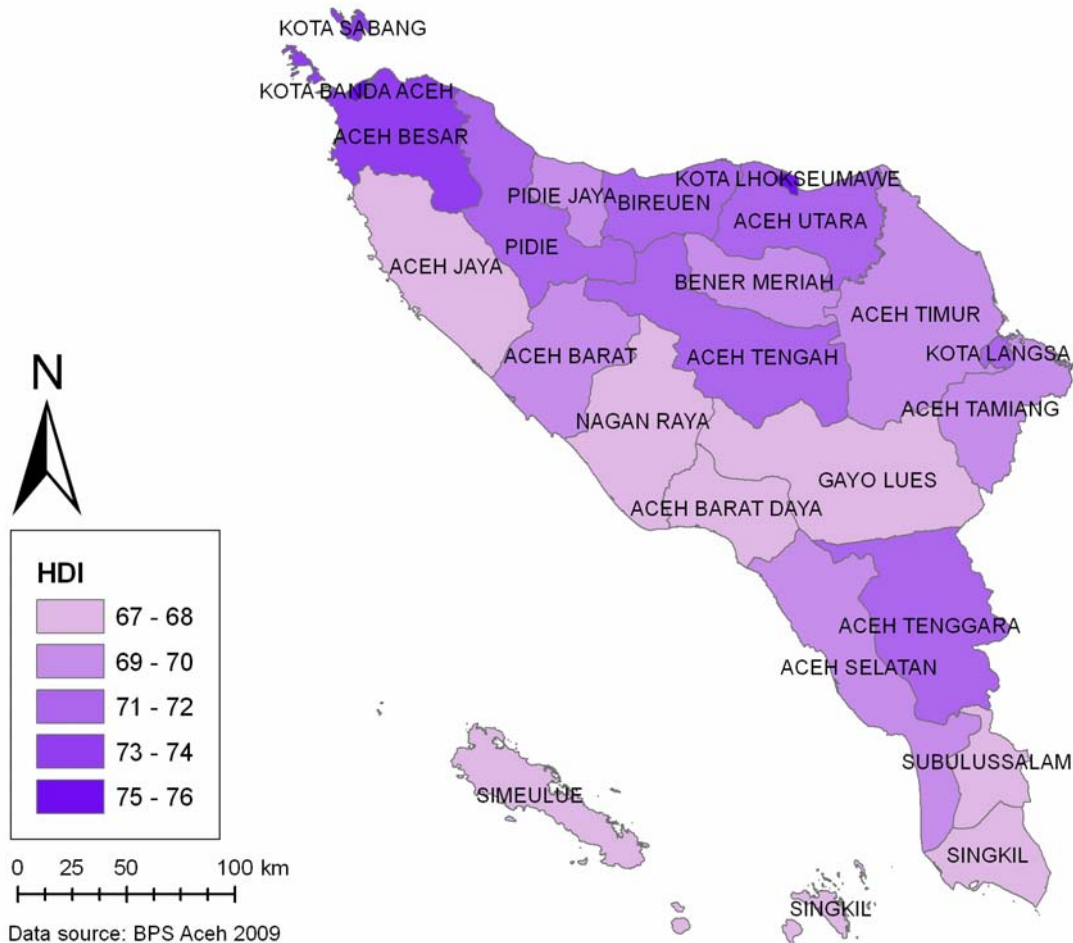
The language the governor used in talking about ALA was widely perceived to be confrontational by highland district leaders and the fact that he has not visited highland districts has contributed to the perception that the provincial government fails to acknowledge the genuine grievances widely shared by community members in the highlands. The categorical and confrontational rhetoric on both sides has hardened the fronts and given ammunition to ALA advocates. The perceived absence of the provincial government has left public discourse in the highlands dominated by groups and leaders who aggressively lobby for the creation of a new province, without community members having much exposure to counter-arguments.

Part of the provincial response to the ALA challenge was the establishment of a committee charged with assessing and addressing the development needs of the highlands (Komite Percepatan Pembangunan Daerah Tertinggal Aceh, KP2DTA). Iwan Gayo, a prominent leader of the ALA-movement, was appointed to head the committee. The creation of the committee might initially have weakened the ALA-movement. However, the committee has little authority and no powers aside from making recommendations to the provincial planning board. As a result, it has effected little tangible, visible change in the highlands and there is widespread disappointment and frustration about what has come to be perceived as a provincial strategy to substitute appearance for development, and in the perception of some, a strategy to corrupt the provincial government's strongest critics. Consequently, many people in the highlands consider the committee a broken promise and this has increased the resolve of ALA advocates.

PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF INEQUITABLE DEVELOPMENT

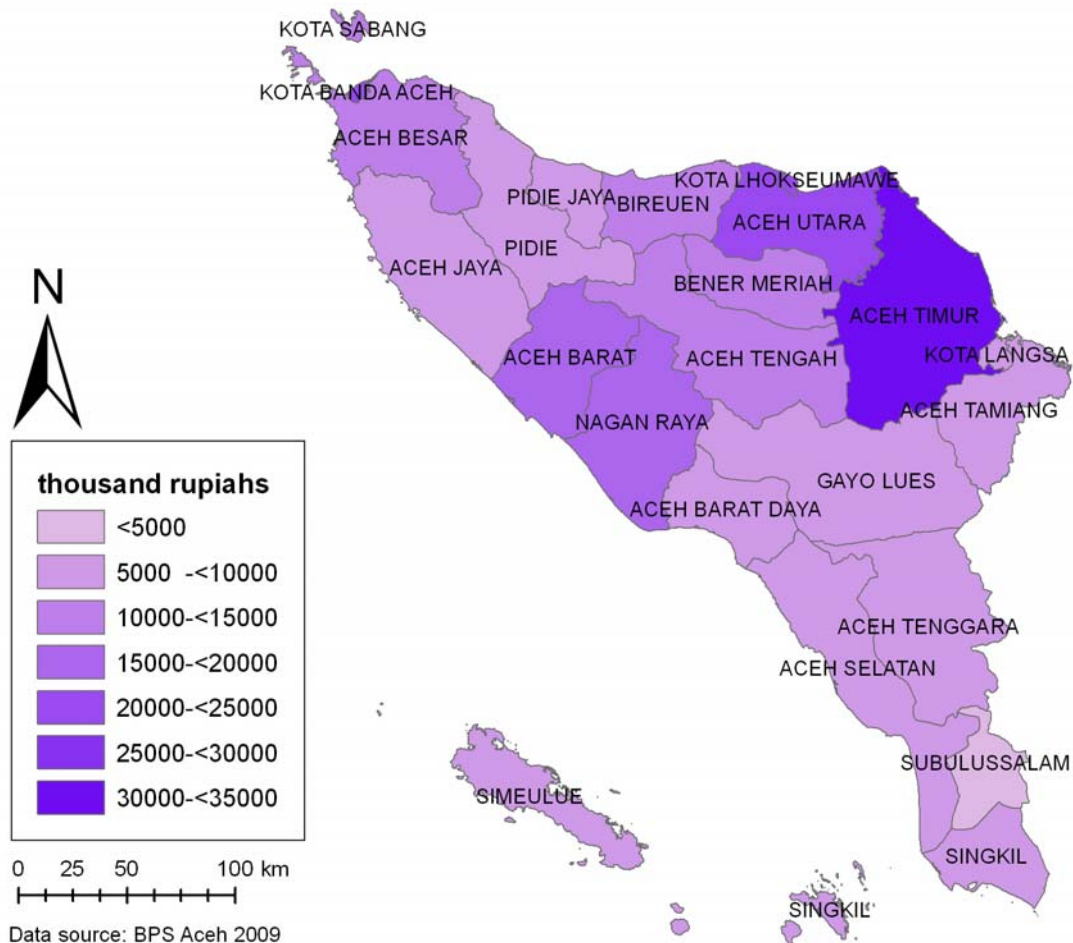
The reason most frequently cited by respondents in ALA and ABAS districts for supporting the creation of new provinces is the claim that there is a large development gap between these districts and those along the north and east coasts that respondents generally refer to as 'coastal areas', the areas in which ethnic Acehnese and support for GAM and Partai Aceh are concentrated and with which the provincial government is claimed to be preoccupied. Virtually all respondents in prospective highland districts, including the few who openly expressed opposition to provincial partition, agreed that development in highland districts is far behind coastal areas. Many residents hope, and are encouraged by ALA-leaders to expect, that the creation of a new province would result in rapid acceleration of economic development, improvement of infrastructure and social services and in the creation of new employment opportunities.

Human Development Index for Aceh in 2007



Available data does confirm that human development (as a composite of life expectancy, school education and gross domestic product per capita) in highland districts on average is lower than along the north and east coast. However, this difference is not very large and there is considerable variety in the levels of human development in the highlands as well as along the north and east coast. Low human development as such does not distinguish prospective ALA-district from other districts in Aceh. In contrast, prospective ABAS districts indeed all have relatively low human development levels and there is an obvious correlation between low human development and district participation in the ABAS movement. However, the ABAS-movement started later than ALA and is not nearly as strong. This suggests that the strengths of partition movements is not primarily a function of low human development and that ALA and ABAS movements might have different underlying motivations.

Per Capita Regional Development Product in Aceh 2004-2008



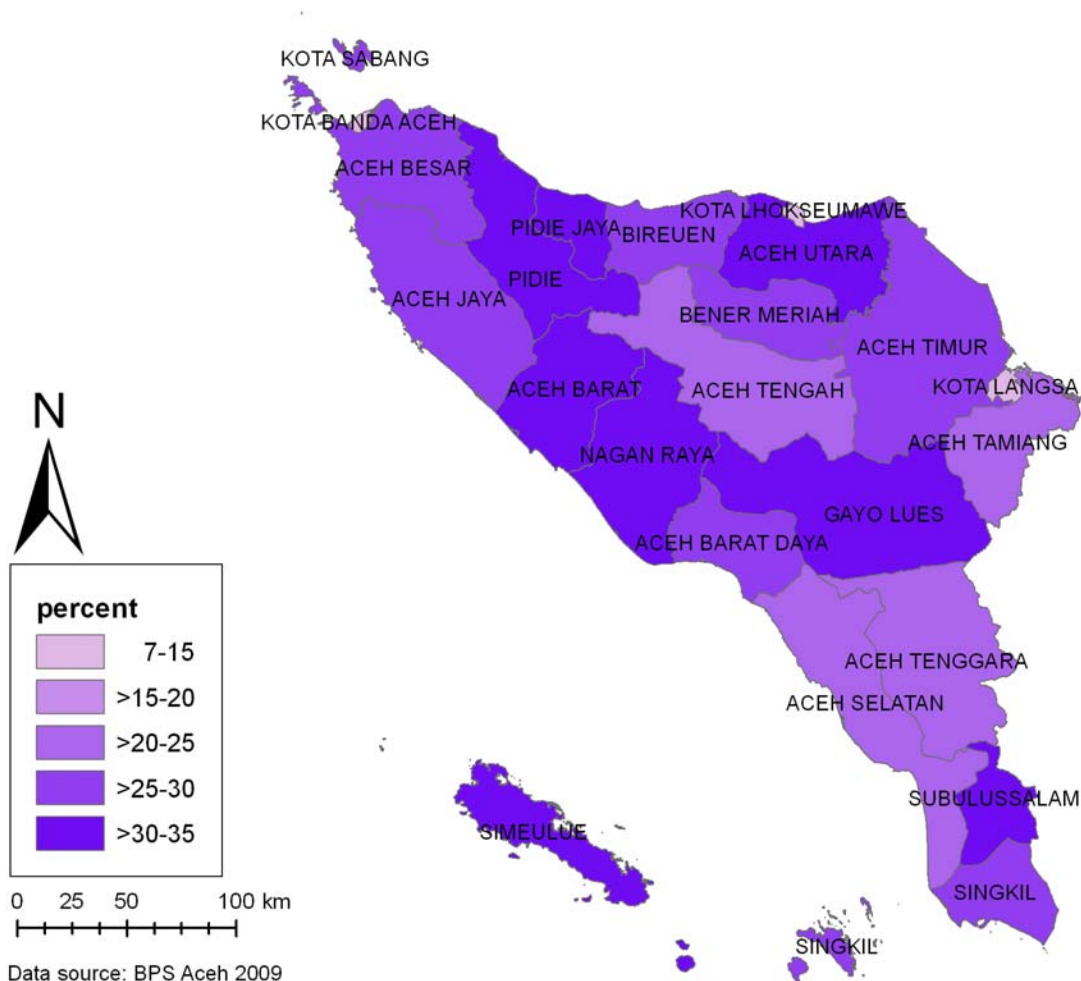
In terms of per capita regional development product, it is apparent and not surprising that those east coast districts in which natural oil and gas reserves are being exploited (mainly Aceh Timur, Lhokseumawe und Aceh Utara) as well as those districts that make up the capital region (Banda Aceh und Aceh Besar) score relatively high. West coast districts that combine relatively small populations with significant mineral resources (Aceh Barat und Nagan Raya) also have relatively high levels of per capita regional development products. Aside from these anomalies, however, low regional development product per capita does not distinguish prospective ALA or ABAS districts from other districts in Aceh. Indeed those districts that are leading the ALA-campaign, namely Bener Meriah and Aceh Tengah, have a higher regional development product than those Acehnese heartland districts which ALA and ABAS-leaders claim are being privileged by the provincial government, namely Pidie, Pidie Jaya and Aceh Tamiang.

This is not to deny the real experience of neglect and underdevelopment experienced by residents of highland districts. The single most frequently cited evidence of underdevelopment is the lack of infrastructure and specifically, the state of the interior road connecting highland districts to each other and to the provincial capital Banda Aceh. And indeed, much of this road is narrow and long stretches are in a state of disrepair. Typically, respondents contrast the state of this road with the newly rebuilt east coast road connecting Banda Aceh and Medan. Many respondents attribute the lack of economic development to the broken interior road, highlighting, plausibly, that this makes the transport of agricultural products to lowland markets costly and time consuming and inhibits the development of industries in the highlands.

A substantial number of respondents concede that significant development has taken place in highland districts during the past few years. However, many respondents insist that the development gap has not narrowed, because more rapid development is taking place elsewhere. Descriptions of the development gap are often framed in terms of balance and fairness. Many people in the highlands feel that their districts are unfairly neglected by the provincial government, for example, that coastal areas already have better human and natural resources yet on top are prioritized in development decisions.

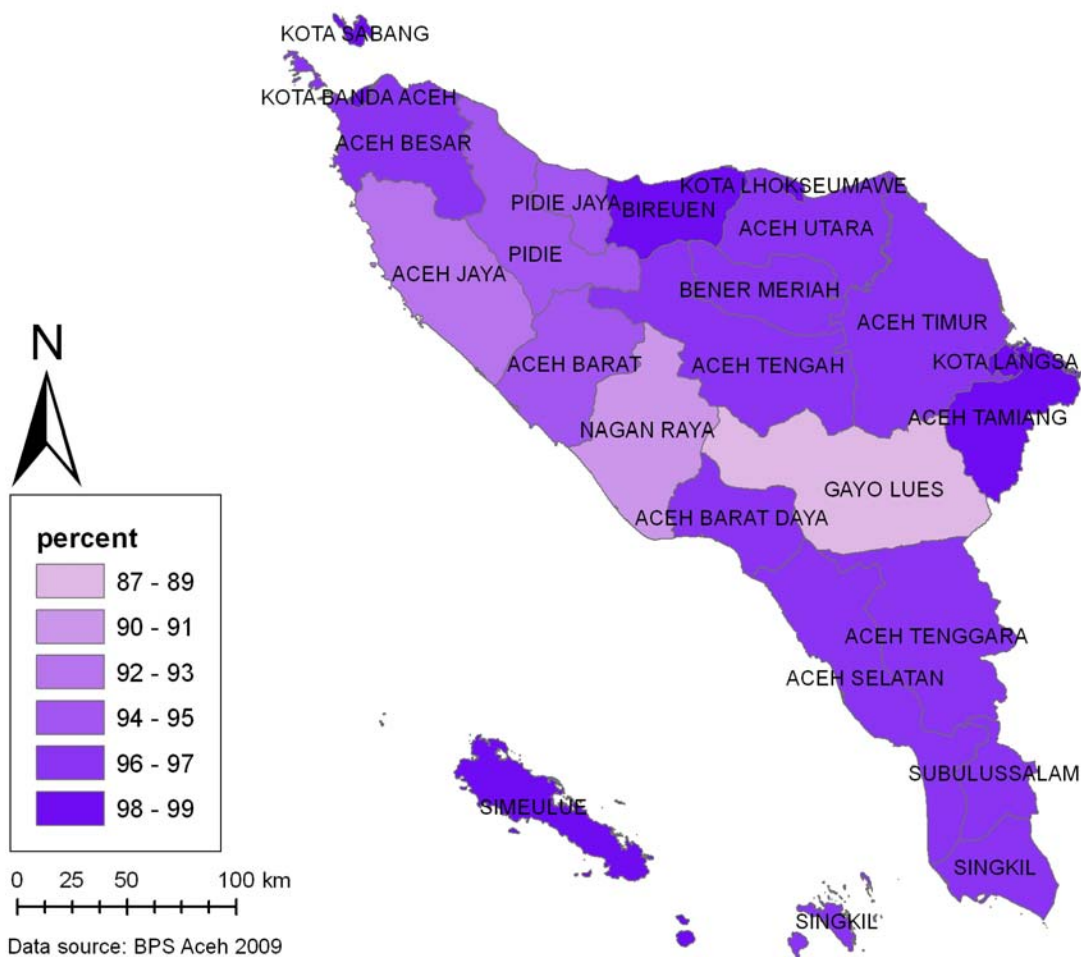
Poverty, in contrast to development, does not figure prominently in the advocacy for ALA. Essentially, no respondent claimed that poverty is among the reasons for wanting to create a new province and some ALA-advocates conceded that poverty rates might be higher in north and east coast areas. As one high profile ALA leader in Takengon explained: "*Pidie is near the provincial capital but still poor. Here, people are richer than the government, there are a lot of resources*". Available data confirms that highlands districts are not more affected by poverty than other districts. While there is great variation in terms of poverty rates across highland districts, Gayo Lues is the only ALA-district among those districts of Aceh most affected by poverty, which many respondents attribute to poor roads, the physical isolation of communities, the inability to utilize natural resources located within the Leuser National Park and the lack of a strategy to develop industries other than those related to agriculture.

Poverty Rate in Aceh 2007



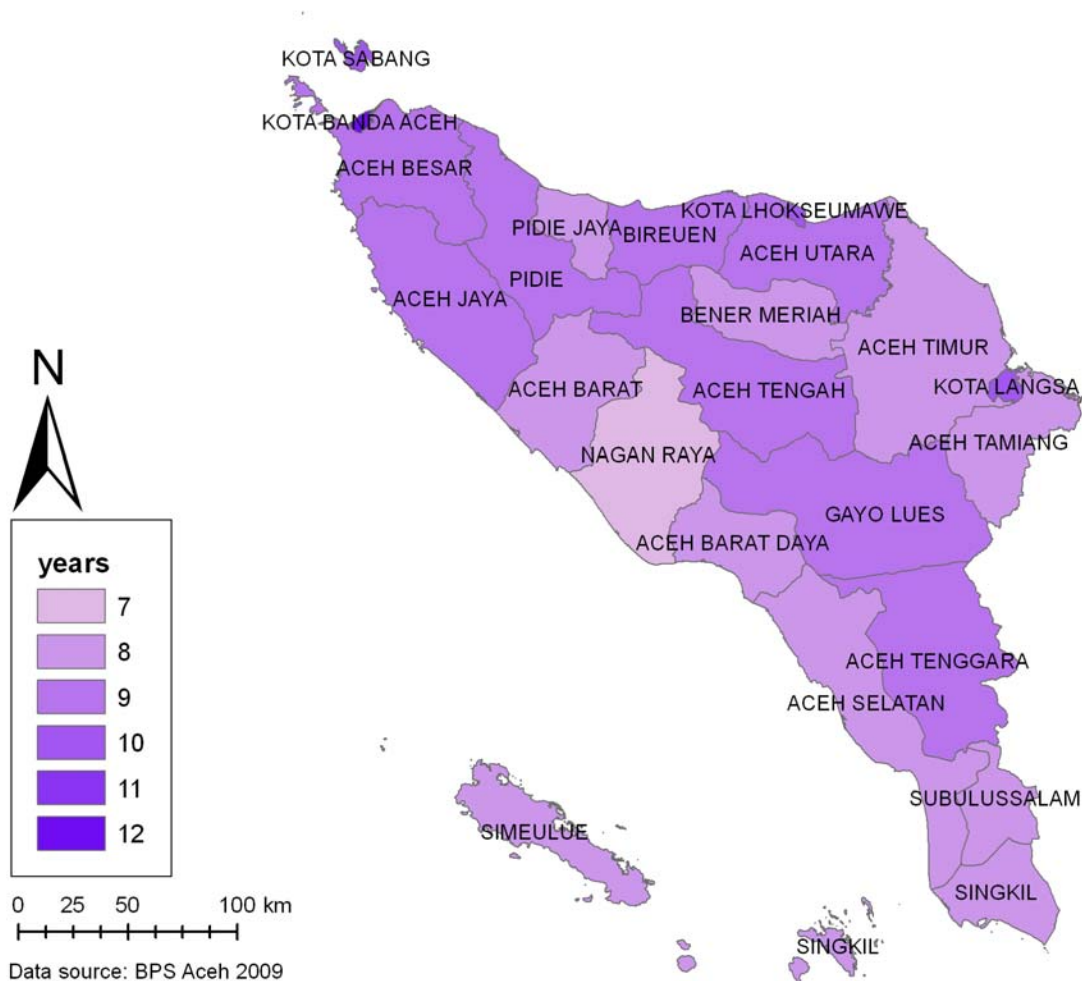
Another sector often cited to support the claim of underdevelopment is education. Many respondents complain about lacking educational opportunities and facilities compared to coastal districts. As far as elementary and secondary education is concerned, this claim is not supported by available data. Districts in the highlands are among those with the highest literacy levels in Aceh, with the exception of Gayo Lues, which is indeed well behind. However, here again, ABAS districts are fairly consistently among those districts with the lowest literacy rates, which gives plausibility to claims of underdevelopment and neglect there.

Literacy Rate 2007 in Aceh



Similarly, school duration in highland districts on average is in the same range as school duration Aceh-wide, though it might be slightly lower on average than in northern and eastern coastal districts. Prospective ABAS districts do have on average lower school duration than the rest of Aceh.

Average School Attendance in Aceh, 2007



Low levels of literacy and school duration do distinguish several prospective ABAS districts from the rest of Aceh but not highland districts. However, the greatest number of education-related complaints of respondents in highland districts relates to the lack of higher education institutions. While there are several public universities in Banda Aceh, there is only one poorly equipped and staffed private university in Takengon and one relatively new university in Meulaboh. Many respondents complain, plausibly, that graduates from senior high schools in the highlands have to move at least to Bireuen, Langsa or Lhokseumawe and in many cases to Banda Aceh or Medan to pursue higher education, which is costly and makes it difficult for students to continue assisting their families, particularly in Gayo Lues and Aceh Tenggara. Poor higher education is said to result in poor human resources which in turn lead to underemployment and low economic development. Many respondents feel that the reason for good literacy and school duration is not the availability of educational opportunities and facilities, but the greater determination of people in the highlands to achieve good education.

SPAN OF CONTROL AND DISTRICT PARTITION

Many ALA-advocates attribute the perceived underdeveloped of the highlands to the ‘span of control’, the relatively large number of districts in Aceh province and the great physical distance of highland districts from the provincial capital. In this setting, many ALA-advocates argue, it is impossible for the provincial government to give due attention to highland districts or to effectively address development needs of highland populations. This argument comes in many variations. As one ALA-advocate explained: *“If there are many children (districts) it is hard for the parents (provincial government) to look after all of them but it is easy if there are fewer children”*.

To support the ‘span of control’ argument, ALA-advocates, remarkably uniformly, claim that various examples of district level partition in the highlands have brought the government closer to the people and resulted in accelerated development. When asked what makes him so certain that partition would solve all the problems he had just stated, one district assembly member explained: *“Gayo Lues was also split off Aceh Tenggara and now it is much better off than before. Imagine how much better it would be to split the province”*. Almost all ALA-advocates made similar claims about the benefits of district partition. One former district official in Kutacane argued: *“A long time ago Aceh Tenggara split and now there are two districts, the same budget was split and Gayo Lues is now better off than Aceh Tenggara. It is proof that partition is good”*. Similarly, a high-ranking ABAS-leader in Meulaboh explained: *“If you look at Aceh Utara, it was partitioned to create the new district of Bireuen, which is now much better off. Therefore, we should partition Aceh into Aceh, ALA and ABAS”*. Along the same lines, one district legislator in Subulussalam, which has very recently been split from Singkil, stated that *“the feedback from communities is that after we became a Kotamadya [municipality], we became more prosperous, that is why communities want ALA and ABAS, for more prosperity. When Subulussalam was still part of Aceh Singkil, it was treated like a step child, it received no attention and conditions were poor. After partition, there were lots of improvements. Now there is the chance to improve more through provincial partition”*.

It might not be very plausible that communities have become more prosperous a few months after the split, with the new municipal government barely functioning. More generally, there is some tension between claims that conditions are poor and development lacking as a result of provincial neglect and claims of great improvements due to district partition. This is part of a broader trend of ALA and ABAS-leaders attributing any improvement to the district, the national level or to the international community and to blame any shortcoming on the provincial government. What adds plausibility to the ‘span of control’ argument in the eyes of many is the perceived absence of the provincial government in highland districts. Routinely, ALA-advocates point out that the provincial governor never visits highland districts and attribute this to the great physical distance, bad roads, great number of districts in Aceh and to the governor being busy attending the needs of constituents in areas along the north and east coast. However, this argument is used hypocritically by some ALA-elites who have conveyed to the governor that they don’t want him to visit and in one case even threatened to have him arrested by district police if he did. Pro-ALA elites have a strong interest in the governor not visiting the highlands, in order to be able to continue blaming him for his failure to visit.

The argument that the number of districts in Aceh is too large for highland districts to receive due attention has some superficial plausibility, as Indonesian provinces have on average just over fifteen districts/cities, compared to about eleven prior to decentralization (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 46). However, looking at the average size of districts and provinces in Indonesia, it would be more plausible to think that there are too many districts in Aceh than to conclude that there are too few provinces, as ALA-leaders imply. If the functional assignment in Aceh is going to mirror the division of labor between levels of the state in the rest of Indonesia, merging districts would be more plausible than splitting the province to address 'span of control' issues. Indeed Aceh is one of the most partitioned provinces in Indonesia. The number of local governments more than doubled between 1998 and 2004, from, ten to 21 district/cities. Every highland district that existed in 2000 has since been divided: Bener Meriah was cut out of Aceh Tengah, Gayo Lues out of Aceh Tenggara and Subulussalam out of Aceh Singkil. One might well argue that if the number of districts is the problem, than districts should not have been divided in the first place. Besides, as Ferrazzi points out, 'span of control' is not an important consideration in the international discussion of territorial organization. Moreover, new regions were created mostly in provinces with relatively small numbers of districts, while Javanese provinces and districts with much larger numbers of sub-units have been more stable (Ferrazzi, 2007a: 21). Neither the number of districts nor physical distance from the provincial capital inherently limit provincial attention or district development prospects. Partition might bring a provincial or district government physically closer to the people and at the same time inhibit their future development. Highland residents do not commonly have to interact with provincial government and plausibly, care more for physical access to markets than to the provincial government. Moreover, if the objective is to bring government closer to the people, this could be achieved by empowering lower levels of government, such as the district, sub-district and village. However, the 'span of control' argument is very attractive for ALA-advocates because as long as the lack of development is believed to be attributable to the physical distance from the provincial capital and the large number of districts, then improvements almost inevitably require the creation of a new province and provincial capital. Accordingly, ALA-advocates typically decline discussion of alternatives to provincial partition. Indeed it appears that all along, part of the motivation to split ALA and ABAS districts has been to achieve the minimum number of districts required to propose the creation of new provinces, as has been the case with other provincial partition proposals, such as the formation of Luwu Province out of South Sulawesi (ICG, 2003b: 1).

THE PLAUSIBILITY OF PEMEKARAN AS A SOLUTION

There is a wide range of local grievances, many genuine, that feed into Aceh's pemekaran movements. Accelerating development is in most cases claimed to be the primary motivation for ALA/ABAS proposals and villagers have been told that conditions would rapidly improve if new provinces were created, such as in terms of education and health care services, infrastructure, employment and economic development. However, leaders of the partition movements do not appear to have much of a plan for the time after partition is achieved. Questions as to how new provinces might address the problems cited in favor of partition are usually answered with generalizations. Most respondents claim that it is obvious, self-explaining that the creation of a new province would boost development and almost instantly solve most of the problems in the highlands. But how plausible a solution is partition to highland problems?

There is superficial plausibility to the claim that pemekaran would improve conditions in the highlands. Originating regions are legally required to provide financial support to a new region equal to actual spending on governance by the pre-existing regional government in the area of the newly created region before pemekaran (DSF, 2007: 63). Since many district leaders claim that prospective ALA-districts do not receive their fair share of Aceh's revenues, pemekaran might look like a way to increase district allocations, particularly in light of the financial privileges of Aceh's special autonomy. Moreover, after their creation, new regions receive their own fiscal transfers (DAU) from the center, as well as a special allocation (DAK) which is used, among other things, to finance the building of a new bureaucracy and the construction of new government buildings (DSF, 2007: 2). The prospect of funds from these two sources is a strong incentive for new region creation all over Indonesia, even if it is often based on unrealistic calculations (ICG, 2007b: 2). Nevertheless, a small construction boom often characterizes pemekaran regions (Fitrani et al., 2005: 8).

However, the amounts that have been provided in practice by old regions to new regions are far less than the share in routine expenditures corresponding to their population share (DSF, 2007: 2). The implementation experience of newly created regions elsewhere in Indonesia makes it implausible to expect that the creation of ALA or ABAS would effectively address the development gap in the highlands, certainly not in the short or medium term, as leaders of the movements often claim. As was pointed out before, most new regions continue to lag behind in terms of economic growth, poverty reduction and provision of public services, years after they were created. While the sectors that ALA-leaders highlight as lacking behind the rest of Aceh, the main interior road, higher education and specialized hospitals, are indeed provincial responsibilities, creating a new province in the highland is by no means a guarantee that these problems will be addressed more effectively. The creation of jobs in the construction sector associated with building the physical infrastructure of a new provincial administration would be short-lived and benefit only a few. The cost of ongoing personnel salaries for newly created positions and for operational costs such as residences, offices and cars of the new administration would be a drain on the regional budget for years to come, at the expense of funds that could go towards human development. It would take considerable time for new provinces to gain the capacity to take on provincial responsibilities. In the meantime, the creation of new provinces would most likely weaken implementation capacity and decrease, rather than increase, quality of and access to public services, which are already limited, not least due to recent partition at the district level. The prime beneficiaries of pemekaran would be district bureaucrats and legislators, contractors and businesspeople but people in the communities, who were promised that partition would bring them development, would likely be disappointed and further alienated, as a result of unrealistic expectations deliberately created by primary beneficiaries.

The districts from which ALA and ABAS would separate would be more justified in expecting accelerated development as a result of partition. ALA in particular would be a largely land-locked province without urban centers, regularly serviced airports, universities, specialized hospitals, oil and gas revenues and industrial installations, most of which are in the districts along the north and east coast. Of course this situation is part of the rationale for seeking new provinces but partition would not change the inequitable division of economic potential. Plausibly to counter this concern, ALA-leaders claim that there are major natural and mineral resources in highland districts which at least match those resources in other parts of Aceh. But even if this claim was true, and there are indications of considerable mineral resources, it would take many years to develop these resources, along with the technical capacity and infrastructure needed to exploit them.

Aceh's desire for greater autonomy from Jakarta was in good part motivated by benefits from Aceh's natural resources being enjoyed elsewhere. ALA and ABAS-leaders, in contrast, do not claim that the underdevelopment in these regions is due to resource extraction. This highlights that the development acceleration promised by ALA and ABAS elites would have to be paid for by central-level allocations, at least for the time being. A high degree of dependency on Jakarta is implicit in ALA and ABAS-advocacy. While these leaders might be acting rationally in light of the incentives they have as a result of the structure of allocations from the center, it would be less than rational for the central level to support the creation of new provinces in Aceh, at least in terms of efficient governance and equitable development. The creation of ALA and ABAS would mean a relatively greater portion of DAU and DAK for ALA and ABAS and accordingly, smaller portion available for other regions and sectors. Moreover, as one review of decentralization reform points out: "*The national executive already feels burdened with newly created regions with regard to oversight, capacity development demand, and financing*" (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 30). Besides being an implausible solution to the problems in highland and west-coast areas, the creation of ALA would be an additional burden on the central governments as well as other regions.

PEMEKARAN: ELITE PROJECT OR COMMUNITY ASPIRATION?

ALA and ABAS-leaders routinely claim that pemekaran is entirely a community aspiration which district political elites merely convey to Banda Aceh and Jakarta. In contrast, many opponents of provincial partition insist that these pemekaran movements are driven by elite politics, namely businessmen and high-ranking officials at the district-level and in Jakarta. Opponents of ALA tend to use the claim that the ALA-initiative is elite-driven to delegitimize the movement. However, this argument should be used with caution, as GAM and the struggle for Aceh's self-government, of which ALA-opponents tend to be supportive, was initially a marginal movement confined to a handful of Acehnese elites, too (Bertrand, 2004: 171).

It is implausible that partition movements would have originated at the grassroots, where people evidently are more concerned about tangible development than territorial organization. Field research confirms that the ALA-movement is largely a top-down initiative driven mainly by determined support among district elites. However, there is also fairly wide support for the creation of ALA among community members, though passive and reluctant, and there are genuine grievances among highland communities, which district-elites successfully reinforce and tap into. An indication of the success of ALA-advocacy among highland populations is that most respondents, both proponents and opponents of ALA, assume that a majority of highland residents would vote in favor of partition, if given the chance. So dominant is ALA-advocacy in highland districts that those who do not support the partition movement do not say so openly, making it hard to find anyone expressing opposition. However, community support for partition is often based on unrealistic expectations about the development prospects of ALA province and these expectations have been deliberately created by often misleading advocacy of ALA-leaders. Moreover, there appears to be a significant element of compulsion, with district leaders replacing officials at lower ranks who don't support their agenda and with the military and ex-militias playing a role in making sure that local leaders, including village chiefs, at least nominally support ALA. This has created climate of fear as well as a false image of universal support for partition, which helps explain why many respondents prefer not to express their opinion on the ALA issue freely.

In contrast to ALA-leaders and district-elites, villagers are often reluctant to talk about the partition movement (Grayman, 2008). Those who do state their opinion are in most cases vaguely in favor of partition, but often express this support in conditional terms, highlighting that they support partition only to the extent that it does address the development needs of the highlands. If these can be addressed within the framework of Aceh Province, then for many there is no need for creating a new province. This contrast between district elites and community members suggests that elites advocating for partition may not only, and maybe not primarily, have the stated reasons for partition and the aspiration of highland communities at heart. ALA-advocacy is a high priority for many district leaders but this appears in many cases to consist of lobbying without much thought for overall development and likely in at least some cases, more attention to the potential for personal advancement. This impression is reinforced by the inability of the movement's elites to say how they plan on making good on their development promises or how the largely negative experience of many new regions can be avoided.

What goes a long way in explaining the determination of district elites in supporting pemekaran are the perverse incentives embedded in the decentralization framework, for the district, for certain political parties as well as for individual members of the district elite. Financial incentives encourage pemekaran, because central government assistance can be obtained to establish a new administration. Thus, per capita funds tend to be higher in the separated regions than in the originating region (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 30). Everything else being equal, it is rational for district leaders to choose a course of action that maximizes district budgets. Various national political parties, which are particularly strong in ALA and ABAS districts, have reasons to expect better prospects if new provinces are created, specifically to capture a greater share of the new provincial legislatures. By creating new provinces, these parties might gain the political support of the new bupati, who could use their networks to raise funds for these parties. These parties would also have reasons to hope that members to the Indonesian parliament would be elected who would ensure businesses associated with their parties have access to contracts and concessions in ALA and ABAS provinces.

There are also strong incentives for individual members of the elite to support partition to seek opportunities for higher office or political entrenchment, rent extraction and patronage. Local bureaucrats benefit directly from additional fiscal revenues, the creation of new management jobs, construction projects for office buildings that open up rent-seeking opportunities and through the hiring of new civil servants (Fitriani et al., 2005: 22). Indeed it is widely believed among ALA-opponents that those involved in the movement primarily seek higher positions or other forms of personal gain. The incentives district elites have in the current framework make this course of action, to some extent, rational and there also is an evident lack of will on the part of some district leaders to overcome narrow interests and championing the public good.

DYSFUNCTIONAL PROVINCE-DISTRICT RELATIONSHIPS

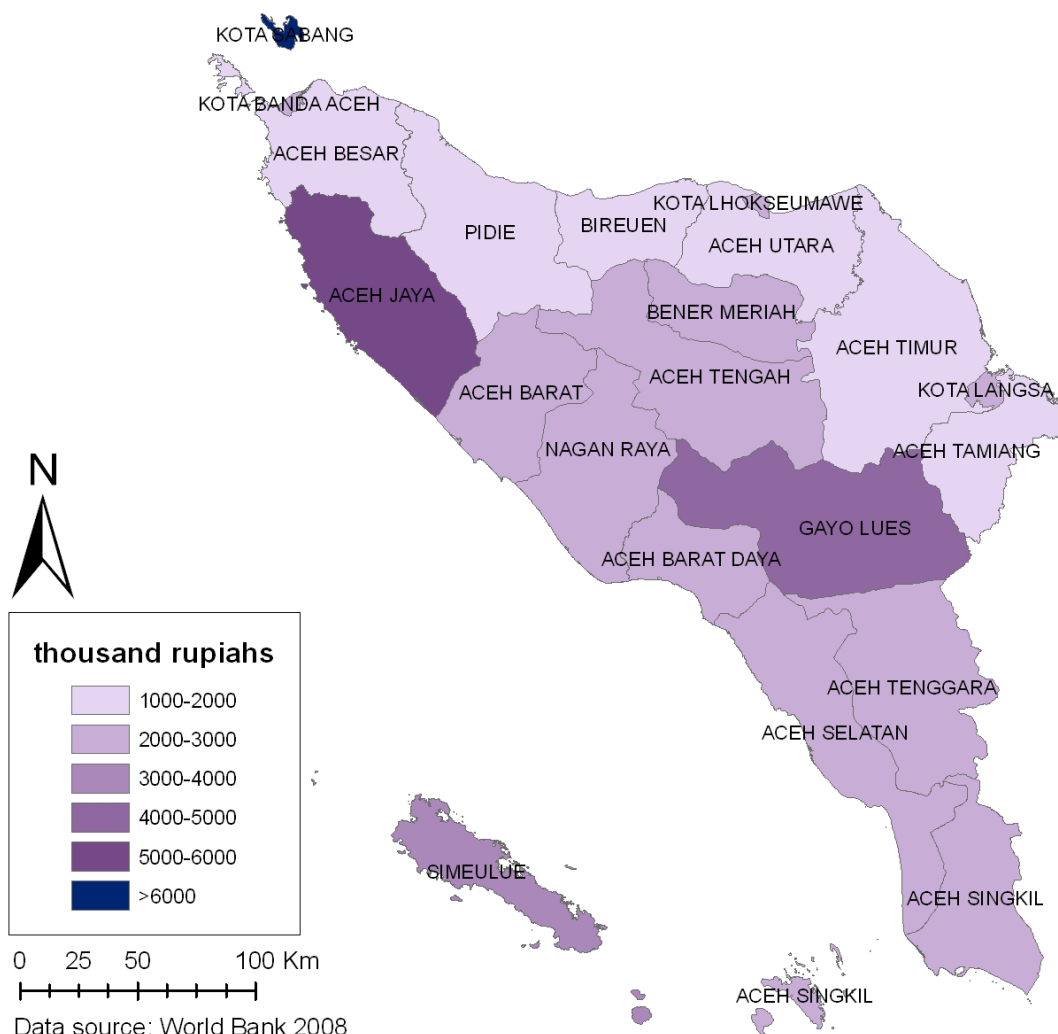
Many political leaders in highland districts link their demand for forming a new province to complaints about the relationship between districts and the provincial level. One aspect of this is an almost universal dissatisfaction with perceived unfair allocations of funds to the district level, specifically special autonomy funds received by Aceh Province from the central

Government under the terms of LoGA². In part, complaints pertain to the fact that these funds are split, with 40 per cent for the provincial level and 60 per cent allocated to districts according to a formula. Many district officials explain that the governor has no constituency and no territory and that a greater share of these funds should be allocated to districts, which are closer to the people and know better about local development priorities. Many argue that a greater portion should be allocated to highland districts due to their underdevelopment. To make matters worse, NGOs and donors working in post-tsunami Aceh largely bypass the highlands, which, although it is justifiable, increased resentment and suspicion that the populations of the highlands are indeed economically discriminated against. However, the claim that highland districts are systematically disadvantaged in the allocation of funds is not supported by available data. No ALA or ABAS district is in the lowest per capita allocation bracket and, almost without exception, every prospective ALA and ABAS district has a higher per capita allocation than any other district of Aceh. Specifically, every highland district has higher per capita revenues than any of the coastal districts that respondents frequently claim are privileged in the budget allocation, such as Bireuen and Pidie.

Aside from allocations, many district officials complaint about the way special autonomy funds are managed. As a major review of decentralization reform notes with regards to Aceh: *“Provincial-district relations are already tense and in need of careful management. The handling of special autonomy/oil and gas funds has made the districts doubtful of provincial intentions and capacity. The 2008 and 2009 allocation that were to be done on the basis of project proposal/adjudication mechanisms (not well received by the districts) has proven to be unworkable”* (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 74). This is particularly true of district-province-relationships in Aceh’s highland districts, where the ALA-controversy and, in part as a result, a lack of consultation reinforce considerable tensions.

² Funds received by Aceh under LoGA are set at two per cent of the national DAU ceiling for the next fifteen years, reducing to one per cent between the 16th and 20th year.

Total per capita revenue in Aceh 2007



Many district leaders complain that they have to beg the province for projects and blame the provincial level for great delays in decision-making on district-level projects to be financed with special autonomy funds. There are widespread and well-founded complaints about the slowness of the budget approval and disbursement process at the provincial level making it virtually impossible to achieve the required level of project realization, about the provincial government micromanaging project implementation, changing plans submitted by districts without consulting district officials and about the resulting plans being inadequate. Many district leaders feel that the province too tightly controls and supervises district level implementation, including the selection of contractors, who some claim are disproportionately selected from among Banda Aceh-based companies close to the ruling party. The latter is plausible in light of the widespread view that GAM control of the construction sector is “one of Aceh’s new political realities” (ICG, 2007a: 12, Aspinall, 2009). Many district leaders express a strong desire to sit down with provincial officials to discuss project planning and implementation.

Special autonomy funds not disbursed in the course of one year have to be transferred back to Jakarta and this affects a great proportion of allocated funds for years in a row, with budgets being regularly approved and disbursed late by the provincial parliament and administration. Only a fraction of funds allocated to highland districts is actually disbursed and this contributes to the frustration of district officials, who argue that if more responsibility for project management was at the district level, a greater proportion of allocated funds would actually be spent. It appears that at least in part, disbursement at the provincial level is slow because provincial officials are anxious to avoid mistakes that might lead to accusations of corruption.

Allocation and management of special autonomy funds is only one aspect of the considerable frustration highland district officials express about their relationship with the provincial level. Many legislative and executive officials feel that the provincial government encroaches on the autonomy of district administrations. Generally, the decentralization framework in Indonesia assigns the same functions to district and provincial levels at different ‘scales’, resulting in a built-in need for negotiation and consultation (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 47). In Aceh, the larger legal framework is in principal trumped by provisions of special autonomy, but most of the required legal instruments called for in LoGA have not been adopted (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 72). For most regulations, LoGA, as the larger Indonesian legal framework, assigns functions to both levels, without specifying the division of authority between provincial and district levels, which exacerbated competing autonomy and authority claims (Becker and Greve, 2009). Aceh’s special autonomy status means a stronger provincial role toward the districts and accordingly, some district leaders in the highlands feel that the provincial level exercises excessive authority over district affairs and conclude that highland districts would be better off without Aceh’s special autonomy and indeed, without Aceh Province. There is a great need for consultation between provincial and district levels but there is no adequate mechanism. As one ABAS-leader pointed out “*the governor is supposed to ask directly for the needs in the districts, to collect the aspirations of people there. If he cannot fulfill them, he should at least give reasons but is not like that*”. Top-leaders and parliaments at both levels are elected by the people and tend to make competing claims to authority over certain functions. As one review of decentralization reform points out about province-district-relationships in Aceh: “*there is much potential for conflict unless goodwill exists on both sides, and proper consultation is emphasized*” (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 74). In highland districts, the potential for conflict is exacerbated and the goodwill limited by the ALA/ABAS-controversy and this has contributed to creating rather dysfunctional relationships between provincial and district levels and respective leaders. Many district leaders would like to limit the role of the governor to that of a coordinator between various districts and facilitator in the relationship with the central government.

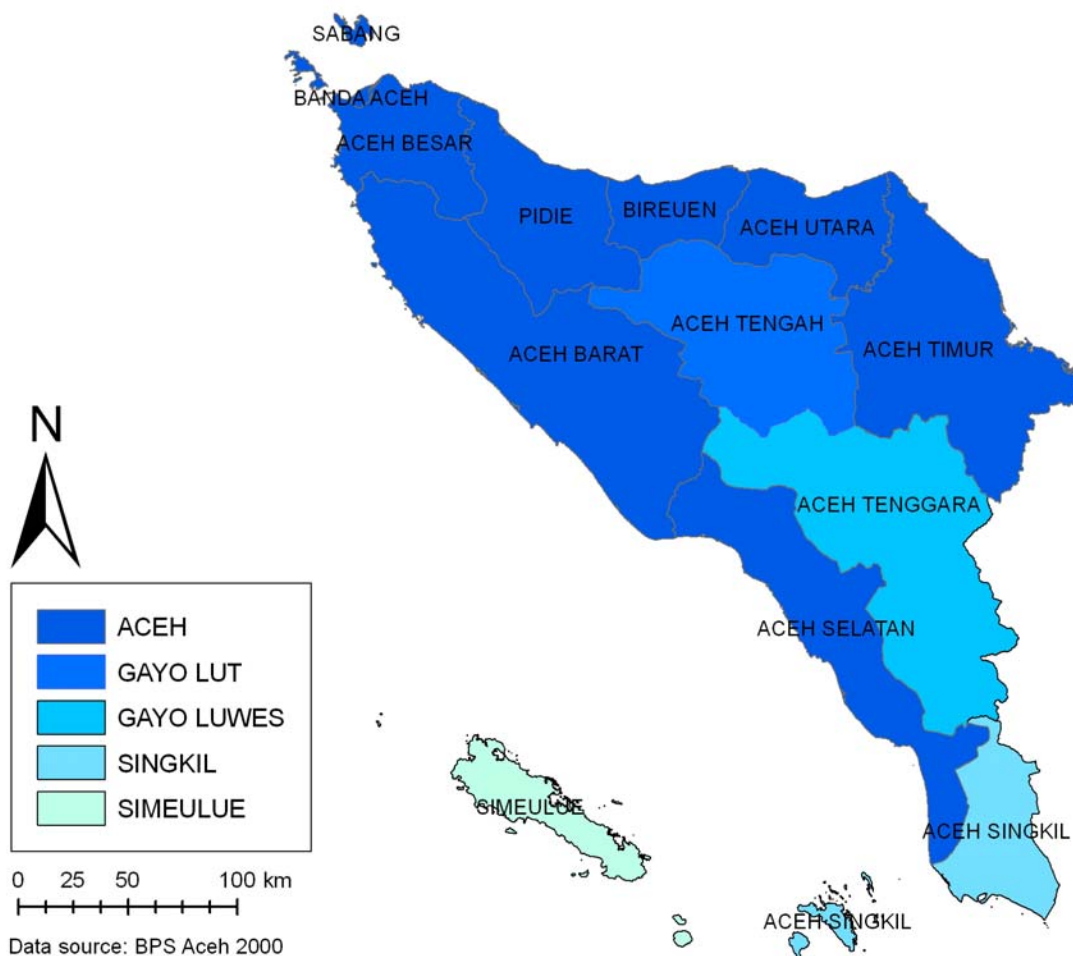
In contrast, provincial officials in Aceh complain that the provincial government has no direct institutional link to supervise the districts, leaving the province with few possibilities to address the situation in highland districts directly. According to the draft LoGA submitted by Aceh to the central Government, the Government of Aceh would have been in charge of supervising its own civil service. However, according to the law that was adopted, the Ministry of Home Affairs coordinates supervision (Article 124; see also ICG, 2006: 3). Provincial officials feel that district autonomy inhibits development in the highlands, because the province can only work through district leaders who are perceived to be at best reluctant, at worst unwilling, to work with the provincial government. Some provincial officials and the few ALA-opponents in highland districts also claim that large-scale corruption in district administrations, of which there are some well-publicized examples, warrants tight

supervision and complain about the lack of means the province has to hold district leaders accountable, though similar claims are made about corruption at the provincial level. Elsewhere in Indonesia, bupati are free from a vertical command line and the provincial governor does not have the means to guide districts and to require them to act in ways that reflect broader interest. The governor, as a regional head, can be safely ignored by district leaders (USAID/DRSP, 2009: 46). This is different in Aceh, at least potentially, because of the greater role of the provincial level vis-à-vis the districts, with districts relying on the province for a good part of their budget allocations. However, at least in highland districts, this has not translated into a constructive relationship. To the contrary, relationships between the governor and at least some highland bupati are dysfunctional, institutionally and personally, with the governor barely on speaking terms with certain bupati. The result is an almost complete break down in collaboration between both levels.

DISTRICT CULTURAL COMPOSITION AND MEMBERSHIP IN THE ALA-MOVEMENT

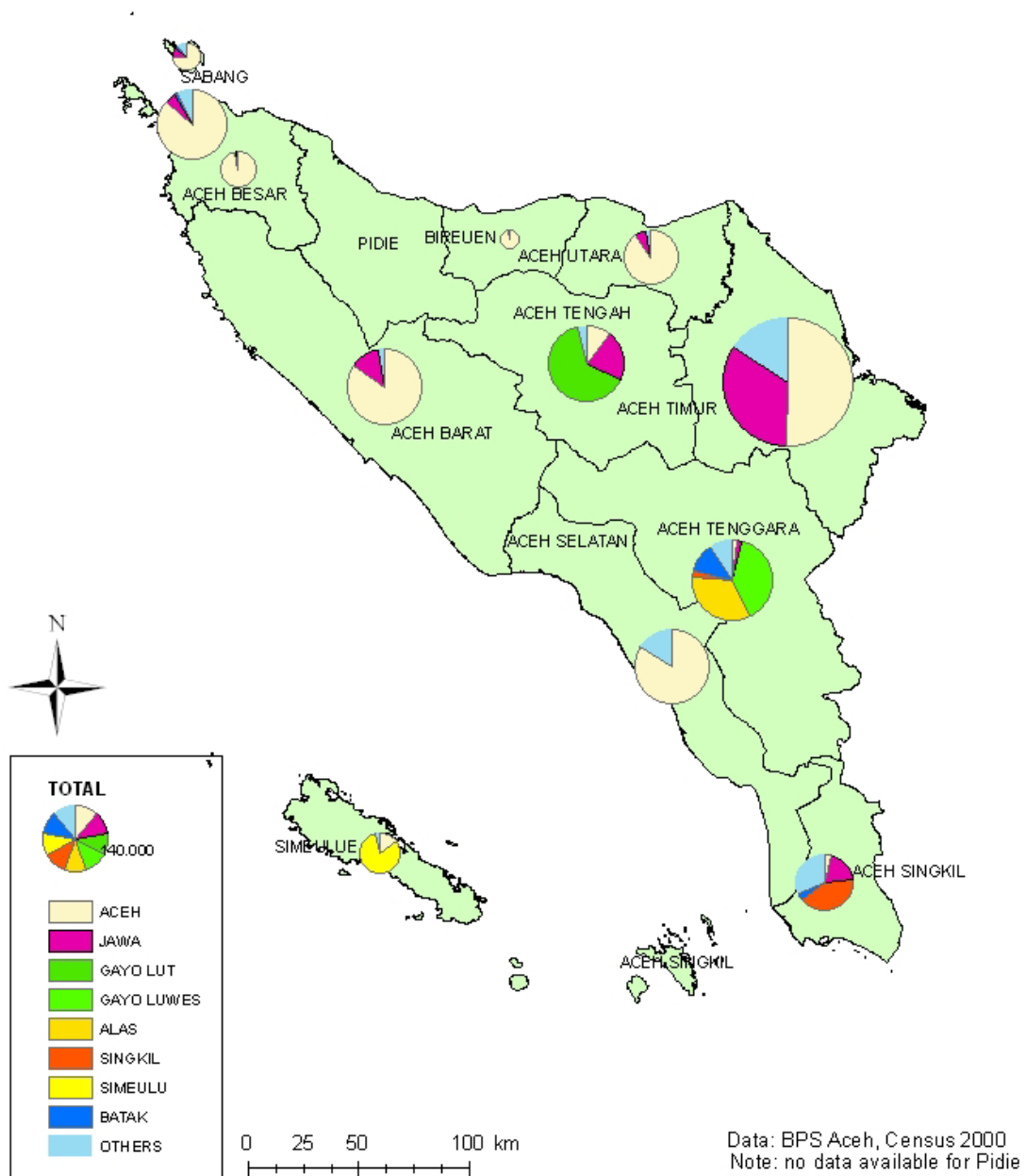
Another argument widely used in favor of partition is that the population of highland districts is different from people in coastal areas in terms of their culture, languages and histories. And indeed, while neither low human development nor poverty nor low levels of education or budget allocations are things that highland districts have in common and that distinguish them from other districts, what does set these districts, and, with one exception, only these districts, apart from the rest of Aceh is that the great majority of residents in every one of them is not ethnically or linguistically Acehnese. Most highland residents belong to Aceh's various indigenous minorities. Apart from Simeulue, which is an island more than 100km away from the highlands and part of what would become ABAS Province, the districts that do not have a majority of ethnic Acehnese are also the districts that aspire to form ALA Province. Every other district has a strong majority of ethnic Acehnese. The most recent data available on the ethnic composition of Aceh province and constituent districts is from the census undertaken in 2000. This census data appears to be very unreliable generally. Moreover, each district in the ALA and ABAS regions has since been partitioned. However, empirical research does confirm that, while highland districts are culturally very diverse, indigenous minorities make up the great majority of the population in every highland district and that in most highland districts, one provincial minority forms a majority.

Ethnic Majority of District Population in Aceh, year 2000



Aceh Tengah has a strong majority of ethnic Gayo and most of the rest of the population is made up of other indigenous minority groups. Gayo also form majorities in Bener Meriah and Gayo Lues districts. In Aceh Tenggara, members of the Alas group form the majority and in Singkil, ethnic Singkilese dominate numerically and ethnic Pakpak in the town of Subulussalam.

Ethnic composition of districts in Aceh, year 2000



If the province of ALA would be created, Gayo would be the ethnic group with the highest number of members in the new province and likely form a majority. The remarkable correlation between ethnic composition of districts and their participation in the ALA campaign does warrant further investigation of the cultural dimension of Aceh’s pemekaran movements.

It is helpful to relate Aceh's experience with cultural diversity to recent development regarding minority rights in the practice and theory of Western states, as well as in international law and policy. The idea of a distinctly 'liberal' form of multiculturalism has emerged in the West, both in theory and practice, which defends certain minority rights as consistent with, and indeed advancing, basic liberal values of individual freedom, democracy and social justice (Kymlicka, 1995). In Kymlicka's influential interpretation, Western multiculturalism is a response to the practice of state nation-building and depends on a distinction between historic national minorities, entitled to language and self-government rights and immigrant groups with weaker cultural rights aimed at full membership in mainstream institutions. In a nutshell, Kymlicka demonstrates that modern states engage in nation-building, enforcing the integration of all citizens into common public institutions operating in one national language in order to create one national identity that coincides with the territory of the state. The practice of state nation-building systematically privileges the language, societal institutions and norms of the majority and marginalizes those of minorities (Kymlicka, 2001: 120-132). The flipside of building a majority nation-state is the destruction of minority cultures, unless effective protections are in place (Connor, 1972: 319). Because virtually all states have been or are engaged in this kind of majority nation-building, minorities in all states face specific threats that justify certain standard protections from states, in the form of distinct sets of positive minority rights. Minorities need protection from states not (primarily) as a matter of liberal values, but as a matter of universal, basic norms of equality and fairness between groups and their members in modern states (Kymlicka, 2001: 242-253).

When minorities claim rights, they often do so in response to states engaged in nation-building. However, different kinds of minorities relate differently to the institutions of aspiring nation-states and respond to nation-building with different strategies and claims. Specifically, Western multiculturalism depends on a distinction between national minorities (including indigenous peoples) and immigrant groups (Kymlicka, 1995: 11, Taylor, 1992, Spinner-Halev, 1994). This distinction has a descriptive and a normative dimension. Descriptively, the distinction asserts that there are relevant and stable differences between the two categories of groups in terms of their histories, current characteristics and future aspirations. Normatively, it suggests that differentiation among minorities along the lines of this distinction is justified when assigning group-specific rights (Kymlicka, 2002: 348-365). On this view, it is the mode of minorities' historical incorporation into the state that most profoundly shapes the identities of its members, their responses to state nation-building and the relationships to the larger society they aspire to. In the case of national minorities, cultural diversity comes about by the involuntary incorporation into a state of a territorially concentrated, self-governing society. National minorities typically resist state nation-building, aspire to the perpetuation of their cultures as separate societies alongside the majority culture and claim the self-government and language rights necessary to do so. What justifies specific rights for these groups is that they were self-governing and might have maintained their independence in a different constellation of power. Because their involuntarily incorporation was unjust, members of national minorities should not be required to integrate into the mainstream society but enabled to maintain distinct societies alongside the majority culture (Kymlicka, 1995: 75-105). In contrast, in the case of immigrant groups, diversity is the result of decisions by individuals and families to leave their culture and migrate to another country. Typically, the aspiration of members of ethnic groups is to full membership in the larger society and participation in its institutions on a par with members of the majority culture (Kymlicka, 1995: 10-26).

National minorities can be subdivided into sub-state nations and indigenous peoples. Sub-state nations were contenders but losers in the process of state formation, while indigenous peoples were isolated from this process. But this distinction between substate nations and indigenous peoples is secondary to the operation of Western multiculturalism. Groups in either category in liberal states today enjoy recognition of their language and self-government claims. Primary is the distinction between national minorities and immigrant groups. In liberal states today, there is no sizeable national minority that does not enjoy substantial language and self-government rights and there is no group of recent immigrants that does.

These ideas, especially as they relate to indigenous peoples, are increasingly manifest in international law and policy and disseminated globally by international organizations. Various international organizations have adopted conventions, declarations and a wide range of policies and mechanisms to articulate, promote and protect the rights of indigenous peoples, such as ILO Convention 169, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and World Bank Operation Directive 4.10. International law at the UN-level today attributes an extraordinarily wide range of the strongest possible minority rights, including the “*right to self-determination*” and to “*autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs*” to “*indigenous peoples*”, and to them only. The global dissemination of liberal multiculturalism marks a profound change in the norms and ideals of modern statehood and citizenship promoted by the international community, away from linguistically and institutionally homogenous citizenship in centralized states to group-differentiated citizenship in decentralized, multi-level, multi-lingual, multi-national states that use local and regional autonomy for the accommodation of minority cultures (Kymlicka, 2007). For the question at hand, it is important to keep in mind that the realization of minority rights to self-government as prescribed in recent international instruments requires the devolution of powers to political subunits in which members of a given indigenous group form a majority. These rights cannot be realized through a general decentralization, but require a specifically ‘multination’ conception of decentralization that creates self-governing enclaves for indigenous peoples and devolves to them those state powers essential to maintaining their distinct societies.

CATEGORIZING ACEH’S CULTURAL DIVERSITY

What is the relevance of Kymlicka’s dialectic of nation-building and minority rights claims, and of the distinction between national minorities and immigrant groups in Aceh? Aceh’s struggle for independence can be described as response to Indonesian state nation-building (Aspinall and Berger, 2001). While Aceh was an important part of the Indonesian independence movement and joined the newly established state, the desire for a greater degree of separation was in good part a response specifically to the nation-building nature of the new Indonesian state, the attempt to diminish the existing Acehnese identity and replace it with an Indonesian national identity. As GAM’s Prime Minister in exile, Malik Mahmud, stated: “*For too long, Indonesia’s diversity has been allowed only so long as it conformed to a narrow nationalist interpretation. This interpretation tried to force one identity on Indonesia’s diversity. This has failed*” (in Thalang, 2009: 334). Aceh’s struggle and demand for independence explicitly invoked the cultural distinctiveness of the Acehnese people that was invaded and coercively incorporated by a Javanese-dominated Indonesian state. It also invoked, at times, international instruments related to indigenous peoples (Bowen, 2005: 160). Much of the argument in favor of Acehnese demands for autonomy and self-government is based on cultural distinctiveness and historical self-government. This is evident in any

number of GAM-statements but also from the language of the MoU and LoGA. Aceh's special autonomy status is explicitly meant to accommodate cultural difference, a distinct Acehese people, through greater sub-state autonomy.

While Acehese demands for self-government can be described as response to Indonesian nation-building, demands for provincial partition by various highland minorities, too, can be understood, at least in part, as response to Acehese nationalism. While Acehese joined the struggle against the Dutch in the name of Indonesia, so did these minorities join the struggle in the name of the sultanate (Reid, 2005: 339). However, they subsequently felt alienated from ethnic Acehese nationalism. GAM-invocation of the Acehese people tended to be exclusive of minority ethnic identities and these minorities do not figure prominently in Acehese nationalist assertions of Aceh's golden past, ancestral territories and ancient language. These articulations of nationalism were aimed at emphasizing Acehese distinctiveness from Indonesia but they also had the effect of emphasizing Acehese distinctiveness from Aceh's minorities. Appeals to Acehese identity and nationalism and the use of Acehese language were part of a strategy that won GAM, respectively its successor organization Partai Aceh, the election (ICG, 2007c, pp. 5) but it has also contributed to minorities relying on national parties, because of the perception that Partai Aceh and other local parties attend primarily to the needs of ethnic Acehese.

While multiculturalist distinctions are relatively hard to apply to Indonesia, they are arguably much more readily applied in Aceh. Ethnic Acehese can quite plausibly be considered a national minority, more precisely, a sub-state nation. Indeed Aceh was one of only a few pre-colonial territories of what later became Indonesia that was internationally recognized as a sovereign state (Reid, 1969). Gayo, Alas and other highland minorities can be quite readily classified as indigenous peoples while ethnic Javanese, Chinese and Batak, for example are immigrant groups, in the context of Aceh. Javanese in particular are recent immigrants, with only 56 per cent born outside Aceh in 1990 (Brown, 2005: 8), though there also are ethnic Javanese families who have lived for generations in the highlands, some of which first settled there well before the Republic of Indonesia existed. In its traditional interpretation, the concept of 'indigenous peoples' would include Aceh's highland minorities and exclude ethnic Acehese (for elaboration on the concept of indigenous peoples and related practices in Asia, see Kingsbury, 1998, Barnes et al., 1995, Kingsbury, 2004, Kymlicka, 2005). For the question at hand, more important than what distinguishes sub-state nations from indigenous peoples is what they have in common: they are historical, homeland-based, territorially distinct peoples identified by the existence of distinct languages and distinct sets of societal institutions.

MINORITY ACCOMMODATION IN ACEH

Aceh's special autonomy status can be described as a move towards new ideals of decentralized, multi-level, multi-national statehood and it could be said to amount to a credible interpretation of the rights indigenous peoples have in international law for Acehese. Acehese are a distinct people that has historically enjoyed self-government but so are Gayo, Alas and other highland minorities. If one accepts that Acehese are entitled to autonomy on these grounds, as most opponents of the ALA-movement do, then it is hard to deny similar claims made by highland minorities on the same grounds. There would be at least initial plausibility in assuming that these groups are entitled to provisions that are similar in nature to what Acehese have accomplished as a result of their struggle, some degree of self-

government, devolution, representation and control over natural resources and customary institutions. However, there are no such provisions in either the MoU or LoGA, at least not explicitly.

LoGA talks about “*the Acehnese struggle*”, “*the Acehnese people*”, “*Acehnese culture and customs*” and “*Acehnese society*”. It defines an “*Acehnese person*” (‘orang Aceh’) in seemingly ethnic terms, as “*any individual born in Aceh or of Acehnese descent, whether located within or outside Aceh, who acknowledges himself/herself as an Acehnese person*”. Interestingly, the law distinguishes “*Acehnese person*” from “*Aceh resident*”, which “*shall be any person permanently domiciled in Aceh regardless of ethnicity, race, religion and descent*”. However, this distinction is not given any policy-relevance in LoGA. The rights and obligations of people in both categories appear to be the same.

The terms “*Aceh*” and “*Acehnese*” are commonly used to refer to the region of Aceh and its residents as well as to the ethnic group of Acehnese, whose members speak Acehnese as a first language. The wording in LoGA is meant to include members of Aceh’s indigenous minorities but arguably, it does so only by misrecognizing minority members as Acehnese. If one asks a Gayo person, for example, if he is Acehnese (‘orang Aceh’), he will in most cases insist that he is Gayonese (‘orang Gayo’). Of course the ancient homeland of Gayo is in what is now Aceh Province and most ethnic Gayo are born there. But they do not usually refer to their descent as “*Acehnese*”. The same is true of the members of other indigenous groups, as well as of members of migrant groups such as Javanese and Batak. In contrast, members of the Aneuk Jamé group, which numerically dominate aspiring ABAS-districts, tend to self-identify as Acehnese. LoGA does recognize cultural diversity in Aceh but only in a generic way. For example, the law calls on all levels of government to “*recognize, respect, and protect the cultural heritage and arts of ethnic groups in Aceh*” (article 221) and the “*ethnic diversity of Aceh*” (article 211) but it does not mention any of Aceh’s indigenous minorities by name.

In contrast, the Qanun Aceh 6/2008 on the Organization of Population Administration does mention that the concept of “*orang Aceh*” includes “*ethnic Acehnese, Alas, Gayo, Aneuk Jamé, Kluet, Simeulue, Singkil and Tamiang*”. These groups are the same that Western multicultural distinctions would classify as national minorities. In contrast, those groups these distinctions would classify as immigrant groups, such as ethnic Chinese, Batak as well as ethnic Javanese (in the context of Aceh) are not mentioned. Except for ethnic Acehnese, the included groups are those that would most plausibly be considered as indigenous people. One interesting exception is the group of Aneuk Jamé, which is not indigenous to Aceh in the conventional sense but consist of people whose ancestors have historically migrated from the land of Minangkabau, which is today the Province of West Sumatra. This is relevant to the question at hand because members of the Aneuk Jamé group numerically dominate prospective ABAS districts. In line with the multiculturalist distinction, members of this group are linguistically and institutionally much more integrated into Acehnese society than highland minorities. Virtually all speak Acehnese language. Likely for these reasons, Aneuk Jamé was not included as a category for ethnic self-identification in the 2000 census. The distinction between national minorities and immigrant groups might help explain the different strength of the ALA and ABAS movements. Those groups that dominate prospective ALA districts are historical minorities who have their ancestral homelands there while there are no such groups in prospective ABAS districts.

While the legal definition of “*orang Aceh*” does explicitly mention and include Aceh’s indigenous minorities, it just re-affirms that members of these groups enjoy the same rights as other Acehnese persons. There are no provision for any positive minority rights of the kind that LoGA arguably provides for Acehnese, such as to special autonomy and and the recognition of judicial, religious and cultural institutions. One might argue that the considerably autonomy of the district does provide indigenous minorities, who form substantial majorities in each highland district, with some degree of self-government. This is plausible, because not only are these districts numerically dominated by indigenous minorities but in addition, both the executives and legislatures of highland districts are dominated by members of these minorities and the cultural composition of district leadership appears to correlate with the cultural composition of the respective districts. In Aceh Tengah, for example, of 25 district assembly members, 21 are Gayo and two are Javanese. In the Aceh Tenggara legislature, ethnic Alas form the majority. Generally, many district leaders are members of the ethnic group that makes up the district’s majority, plausibly at least in part due to democratic mechanisms. However, for the division of labor between provincial and district levels, LoGA offers only three general principles, the same criteria used nationally to assign functions between the central and regional governments, namely externality, accountability and efficiency (article 14; for an elaboration on these criteria, see Becker and Greve, 2009), which do not capture the specific aspirations of minorities. These criteria would not suffice to justify the considerable degree of autonomy Aceh enjoys today, or the considerable asymmetry this autonomy introduces into Indonesia’s governance framework. Similarly, these criteria are insufficient to respond to and accommodate claims to autonomy made by Aceh’s minorities.

HIGHLAND IDENTITIES AND PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION

Whether or not Gayo, Alas and other indigenous minorities make claims of the kind Aceh sought vis-à-vis the Government of Indonesia, such as to self-government or autonomy based on their status as distinct peoples, the extent to which ALA represents or taps into such claims and the extent to which pemekaran would accommodate such aspirations is not obvious from the literature or news reporting and it is also not easy to ascertain in the field. ALA-advocates routinely invoke the cultural distinctiveness of highland people to support their case for provincial partition. However, there is some ambiguity in the use of this argument. Some respondents put a lot of weight on this argument but others feel that ALA is not about cultural difference. One high-ranking district official in Bener Meriah, for example, suggested that the primary purpose of creating a new province is to protect minority groups and their cultures from assimilation and to protect the human rights of minority members. The same official claimed that the root cause of Aceh’s conflict is cultural difference: “*Oil and water are so different that they cannot mix*”. He suggested that a separate province is needed for minority groups to be able to control their own culture and that this is impossible within Aceh Province. It is not rare for respondents in the highlands to point out similarities between GAM’s struggle and the ALA-initiative and some highlight that the latter, unlike the former, operates within the parameters of the law. As one ALA-leader in Gayo Lues stated: “*Aceh struggled for a long time with Jakarta because they felt treated unfairly in all sectors. How can they make such unfair conditions for us? The struggle for ALA is permitted by law*”. Another ALA-advocate in Takengon felt that: “*Indonesia made Aceh the step child and now Aceh makes ALA the step child*”. Some other respondents felt that highland minorities were suppressed by the Acehnese majority in recent decades and more than a few highlighted that the creation of ALA would put Acehnese and minority cultures on equal footing, balance and

equalize the relationship between different ethnic groups. In contrast to this view, however, many other respondents stated that development, not ethnicity is the main aspiration driving the ALA-movement. Indeed many of those who highlight cultural difference in support of ALA were at a loss to explain what the problems are minorities have in Aceh and how the creation of a new province would contribute to solving them.

Members of minority groups in the highlands do have distinct and robust cultural identities. Gayo, for example, is a strong identity in which people take great pride. Linguistic evidence suggests that Gayo once lived on the north coast of Aceh and moved to the highlands in order to save Gayo linguistic and cultural identity from being absorbed into that of the Acehnese during the expansion of the Aceh Sultanate in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Bowen, 1991: 15). Many respondents point out that minorities in the highlands are culturally and linguistically closer to each other (and to Batak in North Sumatra) than any of them is to ethnic Acehnese, even though many, Gayo in particular, have strong attachments to their ancestral place in Aceh and consider themselves a people indigenous to Aceh, often in contrast to ethnic Acehnese. In part, highland claims for greater autonomy in Aceh correspond to the territory of the ancient kingdom of Lingë as well as what has since been referred to as Gayo Highlands (for a map, see Bowen, 1991: 12). Many respondents invoke Lingë as proof that Gayo are Aceh's indigenous people who share a common ancestry different from ethnic Acehnese and should be more explicitly recognized the original people. Language is one of the important markers of highland identities. There are a good number of minority members who do speak some Acehnese, such as those who have studied in Banda Aceh or those who interact frequently with Acehnese traders, but the majority of highland residents does not. In most villages, the local, minority tongue is used in day-to-day interactions. Those Acehnese and Javanese who live in minority-dominated communities generally learn the local language. In contrast, everyone in the highlands, with maybe the exception of a very few very old people, speaks Indonesian well.

Many respondents pointed out that the highlands are culturally and linguistically more diverse than Aceh's coastal areas. During the past few decades, large numbers of Javanese transmigrants have settled in the highlands and there are also significant numbers of ethnic Acehnese residents. Relationships between longstanding residents and newcomers, both Javanese and Acehnese, are generally good, though not everyone welcomes ethnic Acehnese. There are large numbers of inter-marriages across all ethnic lines. Newcomers tend to adapt to local customs and to learn the local language. As such their presence has not generated substantial resistance among people in the highlands. Many respondents claim with pride that highland society is more accommodating of cultural difference than ethnic Acehnese society in the coastal areas. To support this claim, many point out that ethnic Acehnese forced Javanese people out of their communities during the conflict but highland communities did not. Today, people in the highlands, including ALA-leaders, have no objections to outsiders coming to live and work in highland areas and some district leaders even attempt to attract Javanese transmigration to help boost their agricultural production.

In addition to distinct ethnic identities among groups in prospective ALA-districts, there is also a strong regional identity that is shared among different minorities in the highlands, that transcends their particular ethnicities and is based not only on cultural differences to people in coastal areas but also on distinct histories, customs, livelihoods and a shared natural environment. This is evident in countless statements of respondents, even those who don't feel that ethnicity is important to the ALA movement, which contrast supposed characteristics of people in the highlands with those of people in the coastal areas. For

example, respondents frequently state that people in the highlands work hard while coastal people are lazy and drink coffee much of the day, that the former farm while the latter trade, that the former are honest and polite while the latter are not, that the former want to remain in Indonesia but not the latter. The frequency of these kinds of statements and the way they assume difference between highland and coastal areas as pre-existing reality highlight that there is a fairly robust and longstanding perception of different identities between highland and coastal areas and that this difference is socially highly relevant. The ALA-movement is one way in which it becomes politically relevant, too. This regional highland identity is not of the ALA movement's making, of course, but the sense of shared belonging it provides greatly facilitates ALA-advocacy. Cultural difference is not the only factor driving the movement and it might not be the most important one. But it enables the movement by providing a sense of identity shared widely across all constituent districts of the proposed province, an identity that provides the subject, the "We" to which many in the highlands feel they belong and that the movement's leaders can easily invoke in mobilizing communities. Mobilization for ALA has obviously contributed to reinforcing this sense of "We", the people in the highlands, not least by framing this highland identity in contrast to "Them", the people in the coastal areas. People in the highlands often talk of Acehnese as being the others in the coastal areas and of 'Aceh' as a place to which they do not belong.

ALIENATION THROUGH ACEHNESE LANGUAGE USE

Feelings of direct and indirect discrimination and the claim that ethnic Acehnese convey a sense of superiority and dominance to the people in the highlands are invoked by many respondents who often link these feelings to their support for the ALA-movement. A minority of respondents even claimed that the provincial government is involved in Acehnization, in imposing the majority's ethnic identity on minorities. Some feel that provincial institutions implicitly or explicitly attempt to shape the province's population to conform with ethnic Acehnese norms, in disregard of minority identities. One bupati went so far as to claim that the Aceh government is using LoGA as a weapon to destroy Gayo culture.

Many of those respondents who did feel that minority groups were disadvantaged or discriminated against struggled to provide examples. Most frequently cited was the use of Acehnese language. While Indonesian is the sole official language in Aceh, many in the highlands feel that Acehnese language in practice is a semi-official language and resent the implication of inequality among Aceh's various linguistic groups perceived to be evident in this situation. Many invoke instances in which Acehnese language is used in public meetings or institutions to support claims of ethnic marginalization or discrimination. Acehnese language use appears to happen frequently in public institutions that are supposed to operate in Indonesian language but even those who complain about it in most cases concede that it happens due to thoughtlessness rather than deliberate discrimination or exclusion. Some ALA-advocates, however, use these instances as 'proof' that members of minority groups are discriminated against or even that they are forced to speak Acehnese. Similarly, some people complained about being greeted in Acehnese language when seeking services in provincial offices. Many of those who have lived in coastal areas, such as former students at universities, reported feeling excluded when Acehnese language was used by people who knew that they did not understand it. A significant number of respondents felt that such incidents convey to people in the highlands the expectation that those who belong to Aceh must speak and understand Acehnese language. As one district official in Kutacane explained: "*In the coastal area, when they communicate in the office, they use Acehnese language and when we go*

there, it is difficult for us to understand. Their attitude is that you don't understand Acehnese so you don't belong to Aceh". To remedy language problems, virtually all respondents suggested using Indonesian.

There were some claims that people from the highlands are discriminated against in public employment. Respondents pointed out that many people from the highlands have good positions in Medan or Jakarta but not in Banda Aceh. Some feel that people from the coastal areas find it easy to move to the highlands, to get good positions there and be respected in highland society but that members of indigenous minorities find it hard to accomplish the same in coastal areas. Some stated that this is evidence of discrimination. Another example of perceived discrimination given was that horse races traditionally organized in Gayo areas are not part of provincial sport fairs and that the gambling traditionally associated with these races is now illegal. As these example indicates, feelings of discrimination and marginalization are as much a matter of identity and recognition as they are about material positions and the substance of policy. Nevertheless, politically, these feelings are far from trivial.

INSTITUTIONS OF VILLAGE GOVERNANCE

Another area in which there are sensitivities about perceived Acehnese domination concerns village governance. Members of highland minorities take pride in their village institutions and customary law that is seen as ancestral heritage. Many would consider it a lack of respect for their ancestors if the relevance of these institutions was diminished. Many respondents pointed out that traditional village administration in the highlands and lowlands is actually quite similar and struggled to identify differences between the two. However, there were claims, including by ALA-opponents, that the provincial government, through LoGA, formalizes and generalizes Acehnese terms and concepts of village governance and standardizes them across the province, even though Gayo and other minorities have their own institutions and terms to refer to them. This was sometimes compared to the imposition of Javanese administrative patterns during the New Order, which often conflicted with traditional forms of local community organization and has been a source of long-standing discontent outside of Java, including in Aceh (Kahin, 1999: 212-37). Indeed LoGA does use Acehnese terms for village-level and other institutions but it also states that local equivalents might be used. Some respondents suggested that LoGA should explicitly mention and recognize minority terms and institutions of village governance.

PERCEIVED UNDER-APPRECIATION AND MIS-REPRESENTATION OF HIGHLAND IDENTITIES

Aside from claims of discrimination, a majority of minority respondents expressed the feeling that the identities and contributions of Aceh's indigenous minorities to the history and development of Aceh and Indonesia are under-appreciated, not fully recognized or misrepresented. This perception is widely shared both among supporters and opponents of the ALA-movement and it appears particularly strong among Gayo people. As one ALA leader in Takengon claimed "*there is a plan to misrepresent history, to make it all about Acehnese but so much of it is actually from Gayo, not from Acehnese*". Some statements suggest that this relates in part to the fact that many minority members consider their groups to be indigenous to Aceh and feel that they should be recognized as such. As one teacher in a

village in Bener Meriah complained: *“Contributions of Gayo are systematically hidden in coastal areas. Gayo are the original people in Aceh but their contributions are downplayed and not recognized. The sad thing is that there is no respect from the province for Gayo. There are so many Gayo heroes but there is no respect for them, they are not included in the history of Aceh and Indonesia”*. Many Gayo feel that their ancestors played important roles in the struggle against colonization but that this is not recognized in public discourse, official statements and history books, both in Aceh and in Indonesia. About the later, Bowen observed that *“by the 1980s many Gayo were alarmed by new government-sponsored histories that reduced the place given to the Gayo in the Sumatran past”* (1991: 2). An example often quoted by respondents is Radio Rimba Raya, a radio station that broadcasted from Takengon during the Dutch occupation and that proclaimed the Republic of Indonesia in 1945. While this is a widely known fact, many Gayo feel that Radio Rimba Raya was a Gayo contribution to the history of Indonesia but has since come to be misrepresented as Acehnese contribution. Of course, the homeland of Gayo is in Aceh but many Gayo feel that they are misrecognized as Acehnese and that their heroes and contributions should be attributed more explicitly to Gayo. Similar sentiments are present among other indigenous minorities. The emergence of a Gayo identity politics might or might not be a recent phenomenon and it might or might not have been in play at the time when the historical events on which many of today’s claims are based unfolded. One should be cautious not to assign timeless identities based on present narratives, many of which are deliberately created to mobilize identity politics in favor of ALA. However, present narratives are a political reality with significant implications for inter-ethnic relations in Aceh.

There were also some complaints about the perceived expropriation of cultural contributions, such as popular dances that Gayo feel are distinct to their culture but that are now considered Acehnese. Some likened these complains to Malaysia’s claims to Indonesian cultural accomplishments such as batik designs and traditional songs and dances. More generally, some minority members felt that they are looked down upon and considered as backward and primitive by people in coastal areas, who sometimes call them “Aceh Batak”, suggesting that they are not proper Muslims, which those who follow Islam find insulting. Similarly, there are Acehnese stereotypes of the Gayo as an unsophisticated people who emerged from animism only recently (Bowen, 1991: 15). Some feel that ethnic Acehnese consider themselves the sole owners of Aceh. Complaints about this kind of under-appreciation and misrecognition, from ALA-supporters as well as ALA-opponents, are quite frequent among minority members, though as previously pointed out, there also are forms of stereotyping ethnic Acehnese by highland group as being lazy, rude and xenophobic, for example. Complaints by highland groups about misrecognition are reinforced by the rhetoric of ALA leaders and are clearly one of various grievances which the ALA-movement taps into. This highlights the importance of making efforts to more explicitly recognize and accommodate distinct highland identities and to be mindful even of differences that appear to be superficial or symbolic. It is important to avoid situations that convey to highland minorities a sense of exclusion, misrecognition or of ethnic Acehnese superiority.

CONFLICT-ERA ALIGNMENTS AND PARTITION MOVEMENTS

One indication of the deeper and long-standing relevance of the cultural dimension of Aceh's partition movements is how cultural identities relate to conflict-era alignments and loyalties. To oversimplify, ethnic Acehnese tended to be in favor of independence while ethnic Javanese were mostly opposed to it. Along the same lines, most Acehnese are opposed to the highly divisive ALA-movement while most Javanese are in favor. Various highland minorities and Gayo in particular were in a particularly ambiguous and therefore, extremely precarious position, because their loyalties were always suspect by both sides. There is, however a significant correlation between indigenous minority identities, opposition to Aceh's independence and support for ALA. One legacy of the conflict is the persistence of uneasy, sometimes hurtful relationships between ethnic Acehnese and indigenous minorities, Gayo in particular, with many Gayo people feeling that they have come between the frontlines of a struggle that was not their own but devastated their communities and livelihoods, while many people in coastal areas blame Gayo for having benefited from working with the Indonesian military and militia.

There are a number of reasons for indigenous minorities in highland districts to have been and remain over-proportionally opposed to independence for Aceh. Culturally and geographically, members of these groups tend to be closer to the people of the neighboring province of North Sumatra. Partly for this reason, the Indonesian military concentrated their efforts to recruit residents into anti-independence militias in highland districts, also in order to cut off the highlands from retreating GAM-fighters and to minimize the territory controlled by GAM that could possibly be incorporated into an independent state of Aceh. Support for ALA from Jakarta is seen by many in Aceh as continuation of this policy.

However, more important than military tactics is that within the framework of the state of Indonesia, Aceh's indigenous groups are ethnic minorities just like ethnic Acehnese. However, if Aceh became independent, ethnic Acehnese would graduate from a stateless nation to a state-people. Ethnic Acehnese would by far outnumber any other ethnic group and various indigenous groups would be small minorities and, in the expectation of many, even more marginal than they are today. Along the same lines, many highland respondents are dissatisfied with Aceh's special autonomy status, in part because of the expectation that greater autonomy for Aceh implies greater marginalization of Aceh's minorities. Some ALA-leaders invoke the prospect of Aceh struggling for independence again to mobilize communities for their movement.

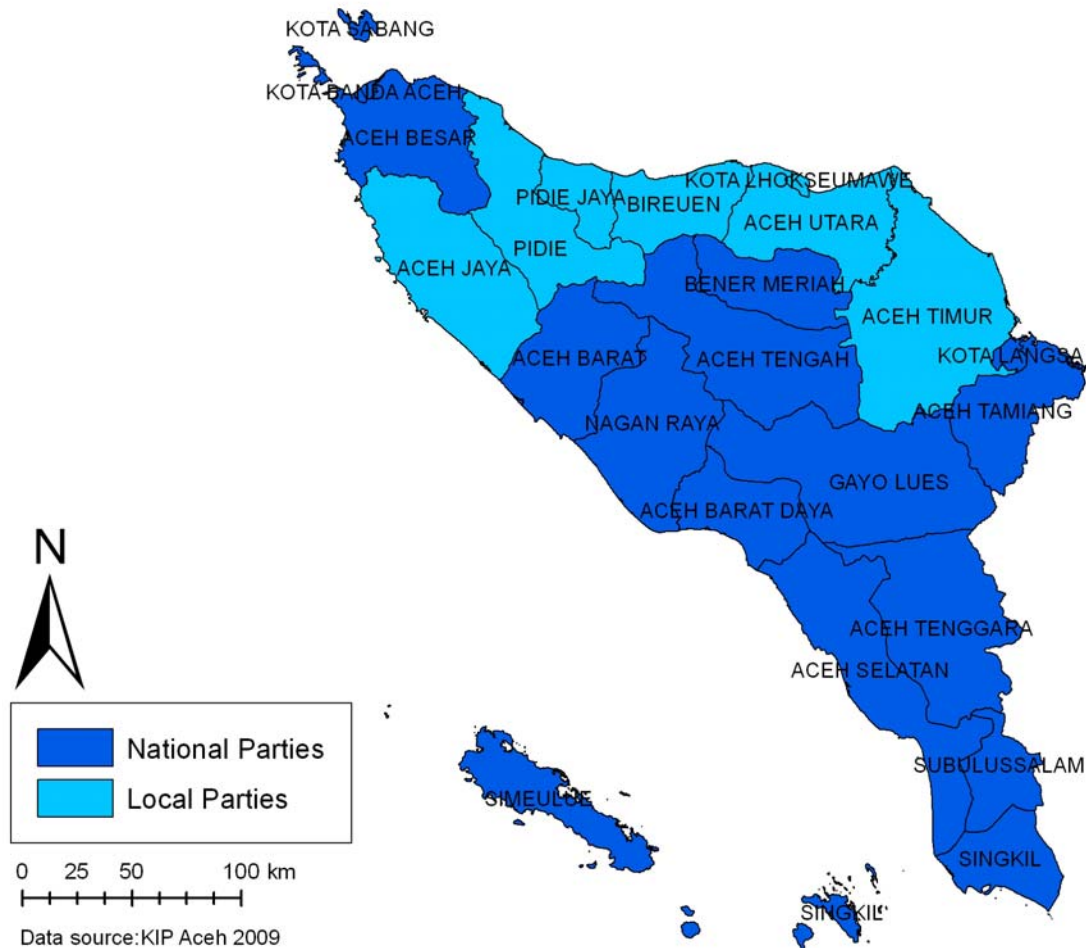
There is also among people in the highland considerable discontent about the design and outcome of the peace process, specifically the lack of minority participation and the lack of benefit from the resulting agreement. Virtually all respondents feel that their situation has improved since the adoption of LoGA and this appears to have weakened support for the ALA movement. However, many highland respondents feel that they should have been rewarded for their loyalty to Indonesia. Instead, GAM, whose struggle has devastated highland communities, is rewarded with great measures of autonomy, resources and jurisdiction over highland districts whose inhabitants were not part of the negotiations. This complaint is not exclusive to minority groups, as all ordinary people in Aceh were left out of the peace process and many ethnic Acehnese, too, feel that benefits are unduly concentrated among a small GAM-linked elite. Nevertheless, in the minds of many highland respondents, their groups as such had no voice in the process while ethnic Acehnese did. In addition, many highland residents feel that the aspiration to form a new province is older than the MoU and

should have been accommodated in LoGA. The MoU is an agreement between the central government and GAM and the latter is widely perceived to represent the interests of ethnic Acehnese. Since people in the highlands feel that they had no part in the making of this agreement, some say that highland districts and the ALA-movement should not be bound by it. Accordingly, most ALA advocates say that LoGA would not apply in ALA if the province were created. That highland districts have access to greater funds due to LoGA than they would have as a separate province, even with special funds related to pemekaran, is rarely mentioned.

CONCERNS ABOUT REPRESENTATION AND HIERARCHICAL INTER-GROUP-RELATIONS

Conflict-era alignments and the way they are linked to ethnicity and district participation in the ALA/ABAS movements are clearly linked to voting pattern. National political parties are in the majority of virtually all legislatures in prospective ALA/ABAS districts and local political parties are in the majority in almost all districts outside the proposed new provinces. Moreover, only in seven out of Aceh's 23 districts is Partai Aceh, the local political party that succeeded GAM, neither the strongest nor the second strongest party and six of these seven districts belong to the prospective ALA province (the seventh district is the island of Simeulue, which also has a non-Acehnese ethnic majority and is one of the aspiring ABAS districts). In each prospective ALA district, Partai Aceh is either a weak minority or has no seat at all. Not only is Partai Aceh poorly represented in highland districts but highland districts are also the districts with the greatest fragmentation of the vote across the greatest number of mostly national parties. Local parties in general, and Partai Aceh in particular, are widely perceived to attend primarily to the needs and interests of the ethnic Acehnese in north and east coast districts, the areas in which ethnic Acehnese are, and support for GAM was, concentrated.

Majorities in Aceh District Parliaments 2009-2014



In the perception of many highland residents, ethnic Acehnese have with Partai Aceh a strong, united voice in provincial politics. In contrast, the fragmentation of the highland vote, though attributable to a range of mechanisms including internal rivalries that have little to do with provincial politics or partition, contributes to a widely shared perception that minorities have no voice in Banda Aceh and that they are underrepresented in the provincial government. This concern was highlighted by an attempt in 2007 to form a local political party, initially called Partai Gayo and later renamed Partai Aceh Leuser Antara (PALA), to represent the interests of prospective ALA-districts, headed by ALA-leader Iwan Gayo (ICG, 2007a: 3). However, this party failed to meet the requirements for registration, as did many other local parties.

In terms of legislative and executive personal, the perception of underrepresentation is not accurate. For example, at least eight out of 69 members of the provincial parliament are members of indigenous minorities, a share that likely is greater than the total share of these minorities in the overall population. There also are several minority members from the highlands in top-level executive positions. The perception of under-representation is likely reinforced by the fact that highland districts and indigenous minorities have comparatively

small populations. Acehnese are numerically dominant in the legislature but they also are the overwhelming majority in the general population.

There is among many respondents a sense that provincial representation proportional to relatively small highland populations may be insufficient. Implicit in the statements of many respondents is the view that the relationship between ethnic Acehnese and minorities in the highlands should be one of equality and reciprocity. However, there is a sense among at least some respondents that inequality and Acehnese superiority is inherent in the current system of governance, with ethnic Acehnese controlling the provincial level while minorities in the highlands only control their districts, over which the provincial level exercises considerable authority. Implicit in this setting, in the eyes of many, is a vertical relationship in which ethnic Acehnese occupy a position of superiority and authority over highland minorities. The sense of voicelessness and under-representation is in part inherent in a context of Acehnese numerical superiority and majority decision-making. If highland minorities feel that their interests are different from those of ethnic Acehnese or from people in coastal areas, then controlling their own province is far preferable to representation proportional to their small share of the population, which appears to be the best indigenous minorities can hope for in Aceh Province. Part of the appeal of creating a new province is that it would transform the perceived vertical relationship between Acehnese and indigenous minorities into a horizontal relationship between equal provinces, which would mirror equality between ethnic groups that the statements of many imply as the underlying norm. This should not be dismissed out of hand, not least because GAM, too, did not struggle for equal representation in the central government but for a separate state that would enjoy the same privileges as the state of Indonesia.

Many ALA and ABAS-advocates argue that the creation of new provinces would be less a matter of separation than of federating Aceh under the authority of the Wali Nanggroe, a customary province-level institution provided for in the MoU and LoGA. They suggest that ALA and ABAS would remain loyal to Aceh, keep 'Aceh' in their name and form provinces at the same time of the state of Indonesia and of an Acehnese federation. Of course this scenario is highly unlikely to materialize. It also is obvious that it is invoked by ALA and ABAS leaders to make partition appear like a harmless administrative adjustment and to extend the special autonomy privileges enjoyed by Aceh to the newly created provinces. But the great rhetorical appeal of this image of the united provinces of Aceh is how it corresponds at the same time to the desire of highland groups to retain their place in Aceh, to which they are deeply attached, and to realize a relationship of equality between the province's various ethnic groups.

ALA AND THE PROSPECT OF FUTURE CONFLICT - IMPLICATIONS FOR STABILITY IN ACEH

The legal provisions for pemekaran in Indonesia, the politicization of the process and the support the ALA and ABAS movements received from Jakarta have increased the potential for conflict in Aceh. Of course there is a wide range of genuine grievances in highland district that are driving the pemekaran-movement. This potential for conflict might have materialized in other ways had the possibility for pemekaran not existed. However, this possibility has encouraged ambitious district leaders to use their influence and unreasonable promises of future development gains to mobilize grassroots support in ways that have reinforced tensions and the potential for conflict and violence. It has created incentives to

instrumentalize ethnicity for community mobilization in favor of partition and by doing so, exacerbated communal and ethnic tensions. Just when a fragile peace had been accomplished, it has pitted the same groups that opposed each other during the conflict against each other again and by doing so, has credibly jeopardized the peace process.

If partition happens, which appears unlikely in the foreseeable future, it is certain to be seen as a clear contradiction of LoGA's provisions related to the consultation of the provincial government. Tensions and chaos, if not physical conflict between pro- and anti-ALA groups would be sure to follow. There is also an increased potential of ethnic conflict emerging inside ALA and ABAS provinces if they were created. In ALA, Gayo would be as dominant as ethnic Acehnese are in Aceh. Currently, any rivalry within ALA and ABAS appears small compared to the resentment of the political elite and ethnic majority in the capital and coastal areas but this might change if new provinces were created and the uniting power of pemekaran-projects evaporates.

When assessing the risk of provincial partition leading to further conflict, there are opposing views between those who support partition and those who oppose it. Many ALA and ABAS leaders claim, implausibly, that partition would be a measure of conflict prevention. Past conflict has tended to originate in coastal areas but has spread to the highlands, not least because GAM fighters retreated to the highlands and were pursued by the Indonesian military. Many in the highlands have been persuaded to believe that partition would insulate the highlands from potential future conflict. ALA and ABAS elites downplay the considerable risk of partition resulting in further conflict, sometimes claiming that partition is the one and only guarantee to maintain peace in Aceh as well as in their respective regions, which is highly unrealistic.

In contrast, many of those who oppose the creation of new provinces feel that the movement to partition Aceh is a continuation of the conflict with other means, supported by certain national parties and the military in order to undermine the peace process. Provincial partition would directly contradict the agreements and laws on which the peace process is built. Many Acehnese feel that the wholeness of Aceh province is a matter of great pride as well as a result of great struggle and that a decision to divide the province would almost inevitably lead to violence and conflict.

CONCLUSIONS – ACCOMMODATION WITHIN LOGA AND DISTRICT AUTONOMY

As above discussion demonstrates, there are genuine grievances underlying the ALA and ABAS movements. In terms of human and economic development, there are specific gaps between some ALA-districts and, more significantly, ABAS districts on one hand and some east coast districts on the other hand, though not nearly as wide and universal as they are claimed to be by ALA and ABAS leaders and believed to be by many residents of those areas. Indeed in some respects, differences with coastal areas favor ALA-districts, though not ABAS-districts. Aside from development, the ALA-movement has an important cultural dimension, as it is in part a manifestation of real and perceived discrimination, lack of recognition, under-appreciation and misrepresentation of highland identities and these are linked to concerns about under-representation and ethnic Acehnese domination in provincial politics. Many of the grievances and concerns underlying the ALA and ABAS movements are genuine and need to be addressed by the provincial government.

However, partitioning Aceh is not a suitable response to these concerns. Most importantly, partition would carry enormous risks for the fragile peace process and would in all likelihood result in further conflict and the deterioration of the situation of people in highland and coastal areas alike. This is also a lesson from the partition experience in Papua. As one ICG report notes, the 2003 presidential instruction to divide Papua into three parts “*has done more to create tensions and turmoil there than any government action in years*”, because it “*undercuts a special autonomy law passed by the parliament ... that assumed the province to be a single territorial unit*” (ICG, 2003a: 1). Peace is a precondition for highland grievances to be effectively addressed. Partition would also come at great costs required to establish new provincial administration yet in all likelihood would not effectively address the grievances underlying the partition movements or meet the expectations of most who support it. The recent creation of numerous new districts in highland and coastal areas makes the creation of yet another government and bureaucracy an even less plausible policy option, given that new district governments are barely functional and will require considerable time and resources to become fully operational. In this situation, pursuing the formation of yet another government is unlikely to address existing grievances. Therefore, these grievances and concerns should be worked out within the framework of Aceh’s special autonomy, at least for the time being, with due consultation of those most affected and based on sound information. A critical ingredient for lasting unity is giving genuine highland and minority representatives a greater stake in the political process.

ALA and, to a lesser extent, ABAS proposals do meet a number of plausible indicators to form political units, such as overlap with existing local identities and communities of interests, similarities in the daily life-styles, cultures, histories and ethnicities of residents, geographical contiguity, the concentration of one industrial crop (coffee in the case of ALA), and similarities in prevailing conditions and development priorities. Highland minorities do have plausible claims to some degree of cultural autonomy. However, in light of population numbers and functional assignments, the district level rather than the provincial level is the most appropriate level to respond to challenges in the highlands and to accommodate important minority aspirations and interests.

The considerable autonomy of the district is a suitable container for many highland aspirations. In Indonesia as well as in Aceh, the district level is envisioned to be the level of general purpose local government and the prime provider of most basic services (Ferrazzi, 2007a: 4). Accordingly, many of the grievances present in highland districts can be most effectively addressed at the district level. To this end, greater control over relevant decision-making should be devolved to the district level as well as the levels below it, with due consideration to accountability. Bringing government closer to the people can be achieved by devolving relevant powers to the district-, sub-district- and village-level within the governance framework of Aceh province. This might entail a conception of asymmetrical decentralization with greater autonomy for highland districts, which can be justified on the same grounds as the greater autonomy enjoyed by Aceh in the framework of Indonesia. Specific interests and grievances of highland and west coast districts could be addressed through intensified horizontal cooperation at the district level, which would give prospective ALA and ABAS districts a stronger voice and greater weight in provincial politics. At the same time, it is important to educate the public, especially in prospective ALA and ABAS districts, about the benefits as well as drawbacks of pemekaran and alternative ways of achieving the stated goals of these movements, such as better utilizing sub-provincial levels of the state. It is time to put the promises of ALA and ABAS leaders to test with rigorous

evaluation. The movements' leaders should be required to show how pemekaran will promote growth, services, and peaceful coexistence between diverse groups. An education campaign on the expectations citizens should have of their district governments and how pemekaran can work against achieving them, and how alternative strategies can yield better results would be helpful to this end.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The consultations on which this paper is based were undertaken by a team consisting of Stephan Kitzbichler, Aulia Rahman, Syahrin Nazil and the author. Maps in this paper and the data they are based on were prepared by Stephan Kitzbichler. I am grateful to respondents who took the time to patiently answer our questions and to Michelle Miller, Luc Demeester, Jesse Grayman, Gabe Ferrazzi, Iwan Amir and Stephan Kitzbichler for very thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Remaining mistakes are mine.

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