Urban-Rural Connections:
Banda Aceh through Conflict,
Tsunami and Decentralization

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INTRODUCTION

Most of the world was first introduced to Indonesia's westernmost province of Aceh and its capital city of Banda Aceh by the Indian Ocean tsunami and undersea earthquake of 26 December 2004. As foreign and Indonesian journalists and humanitarian workers descended upon Banda Aceh in the aftermath of the Boxing Day tsunami, television screens around the globe broadcast images of a city in ruin, reduced to rubble and rotting corpses. The calamity wrought by the waves was incalculable; more than 160,000 Acehnese perished, another 550,000 were internally displaced, and entire villages were washed into the sea (Miller 2009: 1).

What the television cameras failed to capture in the wake of the disaster- and what journalists were prevented from covering by Indonesian security forces- was the armed separatist rebellion in Aceh.[1] This conflict, which since its inception in 1976 had largely isolated Aceh from the rest of Indonesia and claimed some 15,000 to 20,000 lives, persisted unabated in rural parts of Aceh for almost eight months after the tsunami. It was not until August 2005 that the Indonesian government and armed separatist Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Acheh*[2] *Merdeka*, GAM) rebels reached a negotiated settlement in Helsinki that granted Aceh broad self-government within Indonesia. Prior to the start of the Helsinki peace process, violence on the ground had prevented or delayed much needed humanitarian assistance from reaching tsunami-affected villages along Aceh's battered coastline. The ongoing conflict also exacerbated pre-existing cleavages between Banda Aceh and the rural interior, where about seventy per cent of Aceh's 4.2 million people live (BPS/ BAPPEDA 2000: 32), and where the worst of the fighting took place between GAM and Indonesian security forces.

This chasm between Banda Aceh and many rural parts of Aceh, as well as between Aceh and the rest of Indonesia, has been somewhat mitigated by the Helsinki peace process. Though the Aceh peace process remains vulnerable to diminution and is by no means assured, it has continued to gain ground since 2005, in large part because of the political good will and commitment shown by both the Indonesian government and former GAM rebels (Morfit 2007; Miller 2009). Yet despite significant improvements to Aceh's security situation, the cleavages that once divided and isolated Aceh have not entirely disappeared, and present an ongoing array of challenges as the province struggles to rebuild itself and come to terms with its legacy of social trauma.

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[1]   It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the Aceh conflict in any depth. Most sources, however, agree that Acehnese resentment towards the Indonesian state was aggravated and perpetuated by the latter's exploitation and neglect (including Jakarta's siphoning of Aceh's vast oil and gas reserves), broken promises about Aceh's 'special region' status and human rights abuses against Acehnese civilians during Indonesian military operations. For more detailed studies of the causes of the conflict, see especially Morris, E. E. 1983, *Islam and Politics in Aceh. A Study of Center-Periphery Relations in Indonesia*, PhD thesis, Cornell University, Michigan; Kell, T. 1995, *The Roots of Acehnese Rebellion, 1989-1992*, Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, New York, and Robinson, G. 1998, '*Rawan* is as *Rawan* Does: The Origins of Disorder in New Order Aceh', *Indonesia*, Vol.66, pp.127-56.

[2]   The original British spelling of 'Acheh' was generally preferred by GAM, reflecting the rebels' rejection of the modern Indonesian spelling. Despite his outspoken opposition to most other things Dutch, GAM's founding leader, Hasan di Tiro, also used the old Dutch spelling of 'Atjeh' to establish the 'Atjeh Institute in America' and GAM's 'Ministry of Information of the State of Atjeh Sumatra' (*Kementerian Penerangan Negara Atjeh Sumatra*). See, for example, Hasan di Tiro's 1965. *The Political Future of the Malay Archipelago*, Atjeh Institute in America, New York, and, di Tiro, 1984. *Masa-Depan Politik Dunia Melayu*, Kementerian Penerangan Negara Atjeh Sumatra.

We are concerned with the city of Banda Aceh within these broader transformations of Aceh from a theatre of war into a relatively peaceful province under a nascent system of 'self-government' in Indonesia. We trace the trajectory of Banda Aceh since 1998, when the initiation of a nationwide process of democratization led reform-minded politicians in Jakarta to look beyond a 'military solution' to Indonesia's internal conflicts and towards the democratic accommodation of aggrieved ethnic minorities through decentralization. Within this context, we examine the shifting position of Banda Aceh from a city that was surprisingly insulated from the conflict under authoritarian rule (when most of the fighting between the warring parties was confined to the countryside) into an environment of urban chaos as the voices of Acehnese separatists flooded into Aceh's newly democratic city spaces. This democratic space gradually closed and returned Banda Aceh to eerie quietude the more Indonesian security forces regained control over Aceh's urban centres, forcing GAM to retreat once again to the hills. We then consider the role of the tsunami in opening up Banda Aceh to the outside world, and the impact of the subsequent Helsinki peace process on the city's interactions with other parts of Aceh following the introduction of self-governing legislation.

The central argument is that in rescaling our lens of analysis down to the level of the city of Banda Aceh rather than considering Aceh in its entirety, we can gain new insights into the complex dynamics of this long troubled province through its most turbulent period in living memory. Most studies about the conflict and decentralization in Aceh- and, to a lesser extent, the 2004 tsunami- have focused on its often strained relations with the outside world, and specifically, with Jakarta. However, we contend that such essentialising and reductionist paradigms between Acehnese and 'outsiders' tend to obscure the myriad of mutually transformative dynamics that also take place within Aceh itself. These have important spatial dimensions, including differences between 'urban' and 'rural' areas and the ways in which these are linked. Though many scholars have used Banda Aceh as a base for conducting field research, the city has largely been overlooked as a unit of analysis in its own right.[3] Our focus on Banda Aceh not only introduces urban studies perspectives into research on Aceh, but it also brings into view urban-rural interconnections which may have resonances in other less internationally-visible parts of Indonesia in an era of decentralization.[4]

FROM AUTHORITARIAN ORDER TO DEMOCRATIC DISORDER

Despite Aceh's contemporary history as the scene of one of Asia's most protracted and bloody armed separatist conflicts, writings about the Aceh conflict tend to overlook the fact that the city of Banda Aceh and its residents[5] were protected from the worst of the violence. For the greater part of the twenty-nine year war (1976-2005), Aceh was under the

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[3] In part, this has to do with the national scale territorial preoccupation of work in area studies, including Southeast Asian Studies, in general (see Bunnell and Thompson, 2008). Conflict studies also typically take separatist regions as the unit of analysis and do not explore intra-province urban-rural dynamics in any depth.

[4] Indonesia has been an important site for scholarly work problematizing the conventional urban-rural dichotomy, including Terry McGee's (1991) concept of *desakota*, which combines the Indonesian words for village and town/city. However, this term applies more readily to extended urban regions on the densely populated island of Java than it does to the experiences of less populous cities such as Banda Aceh and their surrounding regions.

[5] In 2004, Banda Aceh had a population of 264,168, which was reduced to 203,553 after 61,065 Banda Aceh residents died in the Indian Ocean tsunami and earthquake (Nurdin 2006: 116).

authoritarian rule of President Suharto's New Order regime (1966-98), which retained control over Aceh's urban centres while waging an intensive counterinsurgency campaign against GAM and their civilian supporters in the rebels' traditional strongholds in parts of rural Aceh. It was only in 1998, when Suharto's forced resignation ushered in an era of national democratic reform, that Jakarta's grip over Aceh's urban centres became severely attenuated, thereby allowing the voices of separatists to be heard for the first time in Banda Aceh and other cities in Aceh. Although the conflict continued after 1998- indeed, it escalated as GAM used their increased political leverage to expand and consolidate their local support base- the loss of central government authority in urban spaces after the first flush of democratisation enabled Acehnese separatist forces to mobilise and express themselves in ways that had been impossible under authoritarian repression.

This physical separation of Banda Aceh and its residents from the violence that engulfed parts of rural Aceh under the New Order had far-reaching impacts on the fabric of Acehnese society, or at least sections of it. One largely overlooked consequence of this uneven geography of violence was that many urban and rural Acehnese experienced the conflict quite differently. The daily experience of villagers in large swathes of rural Aceh (especially in the war-torn districts of Pidie, North and East Aceh) was one of fear, fighting, forced migration and internal displacement. By contrast, Banda Aceh residents who did not venture into the countryside were shielded from the worst of the violence, and, until the New Order's collapse, were spared difficult truths about the extent of human rights abuses and the perpetrators by a heavily censored mass media.[6] All of this changed in 1998, when Indonesia's newly liberated national media began providing critical coverage of the conflict, including almost daily reports on depredations committed against Aceh's civilian population by Indonesian security forces. As one Banda Aceh resident recalled after learning of the discovery of several mass graves in the countryside:

> I was really shocked in 1998. Of course, we heard rumours about bad things happening [elsewhere in Aceh], but we didn't really know *how* bad or how widespread it was. I always felt safe during 'DOM' [informal acronym for Indonesian military-led operations from 1989 to 1998] (interview, Jakarta, 11 November 2001).

Another consequence of Banda Aceh's relative isolation from the rest of Aceh was that many local elites in the provincial capital developed closer business, political and personal ties with Jakarta (and other cities within and beyond Indonesia; see, for example, Missbach 2007) than with other parts of the province. Although Aceh's urban-based governing elite was not entirely separated from their rural connections (including through their cultural nostalgia for the 'simple life' of Acehnese *gampong*, or villages), many were 'cut off from Acehnese society by their Western education and upward accountability to Jakarta rather than by a mass base to Aceh' (McGibbon 2006: 325). After 1998, this translated into sharp political divisions

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[6] The apparent normalcy of Banda Aceh despite the conflict was illustrated by regionalist architecture in the city under Suharto. As Jorgen Hellman argues, during the New Order, *kebudayaan* (culture) and *kesenisan* (art) were 'utilized by the government to outline the idea that Indonesia consists of a certain number of discrete cultures, each represented by a unique set of art and aesthetics stockpiled in the performing arts, architecture, textiles and clothes' (Hellman, 2003: 13). In architectural terms, this took the form the development of 'traditional' styles, including the *atap joglo* Javanese roof style, which was embellished with regionally specific decorations (Kusno 2000). In Aceh, such regional variations included designs inspired by the Acehnese royal hat and the famous Cakra Donya bell, but any symbolism related to the politics of Acehnese identity was notable only for its absence (Nas 1993).

between a sizeable majority of (predominantly rural based) Acehnese separatists and a publicly discredited tiny minority of urban-based elites who were locally portrayed as puppets of Jakarta for seeking to keep Aceh integrated within Indonesia.[7]

Rapid democratization in 1998 transformed Banda Aceh from a city that was firmly under the New Order's centralized control into a political power vacuum that was quickly filled by a forcefully resurgent Acehnese civil society. In particular, the lacunae of social and political order in Aceh's urban centres created democratic space for the mobilisation of anti-Jakarta and anti-Indonesian military sentiment as Aceh's university student-led referendum movement and GAM experienced a surge in community support. In contrast to the New Order, Acehnese groups and individuals who were otherwise divided along demographic, socioeconomic and political lines now openly united in their opposition to Indonesian rule.

Indonesia's precarious governing presence in Aceh saw Banda Aceh emerge as a space of heightened visibility for staging province-wide demonstrations and rallies. The most popular site of public protest was the iconic nineteenth century Masjid Raya Baiturrahman, Banda Aceh's Great Mosque, which later became emblematic of Aceh's enduring religious and cultural traditions as one of the few buildings in central Banda Aceh to survive the 2004 tsunami. The Baiturrahman Mosque was also symbolic of Acehnese resistance to Indonesian authority as the scene of a series of high profile demonstrations. For instance, the biggest demonstration in Aceh's history was held there; the so-called 'rally of millions' of 8-9 November 1999 involved about 500,000 of Aceh's 4.2 million people, who travelled from across the province to Banda Aceh to demand a referendum with two options: 'To Join or Separate (Free) from RI [Republic of Indonesia].'[8]

Such public displays of Acehnese solidarity and open political expression were short-lived. Alarmed by the meteoric growth of GAM and Aceh's pro-referendum movement in the climate of democratic openness, Jakarta increasingly reverted to a hardline military approach in dealing with the 'Aceh problem', an approach not dissimilar to that used by Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime. Public forms of protest were repressed with growing frequency from 1999 as Indonesian security forces adopted a new policy of shooting rubber bullets into crowds (Koalisi NGO HAM Aceh 1999). An increasingly common sight around Banda Aceh became walls sprayed with pro-referendum graffiti and peppered with bullet holes, reflecting the Indonesian armed forces' mounting agitation with Acehnese separatists.

Compared to the New Order period, however, urban-rural political networks amongst Acehnese separatist forces were stronger and better organised in the post-Suharto era, even after Jakarta renewed its military crackdown against GAM in the countryside. In identifying and treating both the urban-based pro-referendum movement and rural-based GAM guerrillas (and their civilian supporters) as a national security threat (Davies 2006: 214), the Indonesian security forces inadvertently nurtured solidarities across the rural-urban divide. Similarly, GAM and the referendum movement became increasingly united in the face of their common enemy: the Indonesian military.

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[7]   According to one opinion poll conducted in June 1999 by the Medan-based *Waspada* newspaper, 56 per cent of Acehnese wanted a referendum on independence, compared with 23.5 per cent who favored autonomy within the Republic of Indonesia. 'Hasil Lengkap Jajak Pendapat Waspada: 56% Referendum dan 25,3 % Otonomi Luas', *Waspada*, 7 June 1999.

[8]   Banner hanging on the wall of the Baiturrahman mosque at the November 1999 rally.

Despite their close cooperation, GAM and the pro-referendum movement nonetheless remained divided by their geographically dispersed constituencies and along ideological lines. Aceh's referendum movement was conceived and driven by an educated urban middle class comprising mainly of university student leaders and NGO representatives. By contrast, GAM's strongest support base was in the countryside, where the great majority of Acehnese live, where the most intensive fighting took place, and where the primary means of employment is subsistence agriculture and small-scale industry (BPS/ BAPPEDA 2000: 32). Ideologically, too, the two groups were divided over the means of deciding Aceh's political status, with GAM preferring armed struggle while the referendum movement favoured an internationally monitored East Timor-style ballot on Acehnese self-determination (SIRA 1999). According to GAM, the students were naïve for believing that Jakarta would ever agree to hold a referendum on Acehnese independence, but downplayed any ideological and urban-rural differences in the interests of maintaining a united front. As one local GAM commander put it:

> The students in the cities are also our children and we do not fight against our children. We are all family in Aceh. But one day when our children realise that the Javanese are liars, they will return to us (interview with GAM commander 'Bantah', Saree, Aceh Besar, 8 December 2000).

As Jakarta's Aceh approach gradually hardened to include a heavy emphasis on counterinsurgency operations aimed at annihilating Acehnese separatism, the democratic space in Aceh's urban centres was lost. By 2000, the political middle ground that had briefly flourished in Banda Aceh after the fall of Suharto had virtually disappeared. The pro-referendum movement, humanitarian NGOs and Acehnese civil society organisations were forced underground, and many of their leaders were arrested, kidnapped or summarily executed (Amnesty International 2001; Human Rights Watch 2002).

Travel between Banda Aceh and other parts of Aceh became restricted as the conflict spiralled out of control. Extortion by GAM and Indonesian security forces was rampant at road checkpoints and Aceh's public transport services were frequently crippled by mass strikes and clashes between the warring parties, especially along the Banda Aceh-Medan highway connecting Aceh to the neighbouring province of North Sumatra (*Kompas*, 10 July 1999). Fearful civilians who could afford to travel by air increasingly did so, prompting regional airlines to charter additional flights between Banda Aceh and Medan (*The Jakarta Post*, 2 August 1999). This, in turn, served to strengthen links between Banda Aceh and cities in other provinces at the expense of links with other parts of Aceh.

The growing isolation of Banda Aceh- and indeed the entire province of Aceh- was compounded by the introduction in 2001 of travel restrictions and media controls over the flow of information coming out of Aceh. A ban imposed in early 2001 on foreign journalists entering Aceh (*TempoInteraktif*, 29 January 2001) was expanded in May 2003 to include all foreigners and most Indonesian journalists when Jakarta pronounced martial law in the province. Under military emergency rule, the Indonesian armed forces drew from the then US strategy in the Iraq war to develop more sophisticated media control techniques by establishing their own media centre in Banda Aceh and 'embedding' Indonesian journalists in combat battalions to ensure that the conflict was reported from a 'nationalist' viewpoint (*The Jakarta Post*, 29 April 2003).

Within this deteriorating security environment, Banda Aceh was transformed from a vibrant city that had sustained a flourishing civil society into a picture of authoritarian control that was reminiscent of the New Order. As Indonesian security forces struggled to regain authority over Aceh's urban centres (often through invasive strategies such as a door-to-door disarmament campaign aimed at 'persuading' GAM to surrender their weapons), cities came to resemble 'ghost towns' and their residents became too afraid to go about their daily activities (*TempoInteraktif*, 4 January 2001; *Tempo*, 29 January 2001). By May 2004, however, when Aceh's status was downgraded from martial law to civil emergency rule, the military had succeeded in reasserting Indonesian state power over the province's urban centres and forced GAM's retreat to the hills (International Crisis Group 2005: 4). The extent of Indonesia's restored governing presence in Banda Aceh was made poignantly clear on Indonesia's August 2004 Independence Day celebrations, when the military's media machine broadcast images nationwide of crowds of Acehnese civilians waving little Indonesian flags and singing Indonesian nationalist songs. If these televised images were to be taken at face value, then Banda Aceh's civilian population had been effectively subordinated to Indonesian state control. However, what the military's propaganda apparatus tried to hide, and what the large-scale post-tsunami reconstruction effort would later blow open, were dramatic differences between urban and rural Aceh that would leave deep scars and present complex challenges as the province worked to rebuild itself.

URBAN-RURAL DISPARITIES IN POST-TSUNAMI RECONSTRUCTION

As noted earlier, the outside world was introduced to Aceh after the December 2004 tsunami through its urban centres. In part, this was because Banda Aceh and the West Aceh capital of Meulaboh were so visibly paralysed by the tsunami; in both cities, tens of thousands of civilians were killed or required urgent humanitarian assistance and the physical infrastructure was completely destroyed (Nurdin 2006). In part, the disaster response focus on urban Aceh was also the result of Indonesian military intervention. Although Jakarta lifted its ban on foreigners from entering Aceh to allow for the distribution of international aid, the Indonesian military- which itself suffered massive losses in the tsunami- sought to control coverage of its ongoing counterinsurgency campaign against GAM in the countryside by requiring foreigners to apply for special permits for travel outside Banda Aceh and Meulaboh (Miller 2006: 310). Beyond these localised contextual conditions, however, the emphasis on urban reconstruction in post-tsunami Aceh conformed to a broader pattern of post-disaster response in Indonesia and elsewhere, which tends to disproportionately channel recovery resources into cities 'simply because they may be more accessible and better-equipped than remoter rural areas', or are perceived as such (Leitmann 2007: 149).

In the case of Aceh, there were several problems associated with this urban-centric approach to disaster response, as well as some clear advantages. The benefits of concentrating reconstruction resources in and around Banda Aceh are evident to any visitor to the provincial capital. Five years after the natural disaster, the only physical traces of the tsunami are a number of carefully maintained monuments, memorial sites and mass graves. Tapping into the broader recent phenomenon of 'disaster tourism', Banda Aceh's governing administration and its residents have recognised the potential for 'tsunami tourism' by erecting a US$5.6 million tsunami museum and by charging entry fees to climb and photograph boats that were beached atop buildings during the tsunami, rather than pay costly demolition fees to have them removed (*Associated Press*, 23 February 2009; *The New Yorker*, 27 August 2009). Apart from these carefully nurtured memories of the tsunami, Banda Aceh

looks almost like any other provincial Indonesian city and is awash with neat rows of freshly painted houses, office buildings and bustling market places that bear no resemblance to the scenes of devastation that shocked the world back in 2004.

The same could not be said of other parts of Aceh. In the West Aceh capital of Meulaboh- which was dubbed 'ground zero' because of its close proximity to the epicentre of the undersea earthquake- reconstruction efforts have been much slower and patchier, especially in public service delivery and road reconstruction. Rural coastal Aceh has been particularly neglected; entire villages along the west coast had to be abandoned after the tsunami because humanitarian aid and reconstruction resources arrived too late, too irregularly, or not at all.

The urban-based development agendas and priorities of aid agencies had a profound impact on the half-million Acehnese who were made homeless by the tsunami. This situation produced reversals in internal migration trends. Many tsunami survivors in coastal towns and villages who had family, friends and place of origin connections in the rural interior tended to resettle there temporarily or permanently, thus at least partially reversing the conflict-driven flow of forced migration from rural inland to urban coastal areas (Mahdi 2007: 2). Although traditional socioeconomic migration determinants certainly influenced rural-to-urban migration during the conflict, unrelenting violence in the countryside also 'induced large rearrangements of the population between villages in highly affected districts, as well as strong village emigration from the geographically remote regions in Central Aceh towards the less conflict-affected coastal industrial areas' (Czaika and Kis-Katos 2009: 399). The continuation of the conflict for almost eight months after the tsunami until the signing of the Helsinki peace agreement on 15 August 2005 therefore created a real dilemma for those survivors who had initially fled to the coast to escape violence in the interior. Thousands of other tsunami survivors risked missing out on disaster relief resources and 'cash for work' programs that were being offered by aid organisations in Aceh's urban coastal areas if they sought refuge for too long in the rural interior (Mahdi 2007: 16-17).

Of the hundreds of international aid agencies that poured into Banda Aceh after the tsunami, many knew little or nothing about the Aceh conflict and allocated their budgets accordingly. As a result, even those humanitarian organisations that subsequently wanted to spend a portion of their budgets on post-conflict programs often felt unable to do so because their funds had been locked into post-tsunami development and rehabilitation projects (interview with international humanitarian worker, Banda Aceh, 15 April 2008). This disproportionate emphasis on post-tsunami spending in turn aggravated pre-existing conflict-based socioeconomic disparities between Aceh's less conflict-affected urban centres and the war-torn hinterlands.

The full extent of these rural-urban imbalances only became apparent after the peaceful settlement of the Aceh conflict via the 2005 Helsinki peace agreement, which opened up the interior and enabled travel between rural and urban areas in ways that had been difficult or impossible during the conflict. Previously unaddressed problems in urban-rural inequities were also brought to the political fore by the introduction in 2006 of a Law on Governing Aceh (LoGA). Loosely modelled on the terms of the Helsinki agreement, the LoGA led not only to the realignment of centre-periphery relations between Aceh and Jakarta, but also between Banda Aceh and other areas within Aceh. As the following pages will detail, in addition to exposing long neglected problems in urban-rural relations, Aceh's self-governing status created new opportunities through which to start dealing with the legacy of conflict and social trauma affecting much of rural Aceh, and to initiate restorative development policies.

DECENTRALISATION AND THE RECENTERING OF BANDA ACEH

The introduction on 11 July 2006 of the Law on Governing Aceh (LoGA) (Law No.11/2006) was set against a background of broken autonomy promises by previous Indonesian governments. Following the New Order's collapse in 1998, most political leaders in Jakarta viewed decentralisation, or regional autonomy, as an appropriate way of containing centrifugal forces that were threatening to tear Indonesia apart, and were prepared to recognise a 'special' place for problematic provinces like Aceh and Papua (formerly Irian Jaya) within the unitary state. However, the introduction of 'special autonomy' (*otonomi khusus*) legislation for Aceh- first via Law No.44/1999 and later through a more comprehensive Law No.18/2001[9]- failed to provide redress for long-standing Acehnese grievances against the Indonesian state or reduce local support for GAM. In part, this was because a series of weak civilian post-authoritarian administrations were ambivalent about implementing special autonomy and tended to give the military a free reign in Aceh. In part, Aceh's dysfunctional and war-ravaged provincial infrastructure prevented special autonomy from being implemented, as did Aceh's urban-based ruling elite, who were plagued by allegations of poor performance and corruption (McGibbon 2004: 28-30). Moreover, there was a strong lack of grassroots support for Jakarta's limited offer of special autonomy, which did not address the roots of the conflict or provide any respite from ongoing atrocities committed against Aceh's civilian population by Indonesian security forces personnel. As such, the conciliatory spirit of special autonomy was delegitimsed even while aspects of it were implemented (Miller 2004: 334, 342).

Although the 2006 Law on Governing Aceh excluded or diluted several core provisions of the 2005 Helsinki peace agreement upon which it was based, it nonetheless rectified some of the key weaknesses of special autonomy before it. In particular, a new provision in the LoGA to hold direct democratic local elections enabled GAM and Aceh's referendum movement to reap political benefits from the new system and to work within its legal parameters to constructively engage with Indonesia's democratisation process rather than in opposition to it. The importance of this provision in protecting the Helsinki peace process is clear today, with former Acehnese rebels ruling over a democratically elected self-government of Aceh that enjoys broad popular legitimacy amongst Aceh's civilian population as well as at the national level.

The LoGA devolved far more state powers and resources to Aceh than separate 1999 regional autonomy laws (as amended by 2004 legislation)[10] conferred to Indonesia's other provinces. At the time of writing, Aceh is the only Indonesian province allowed to implement Islamic law (*Shari'a*) for Muslims within its borders and to form local political parties. Financially, too, Aceh has fared well under the new system, being granted the lion's share of its natural

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[9]   Introduced on 22 September 1999, Law No.44/1999 was the first of its kind to formally acknowledge the largely symbolic 'Special Status of the Province of Aceh Special Region' in the fields of religion, education and customary law. Law No.18/2001 was passed by Indonesia's national parliament on 19 June 2001 and changed Aceh's name to Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam (lit; Abode of Peace). The so-called 'NAD law' conferred more extensive powers of autonomy to Aceh, including generous fiscal decentralization provisions that were barely implemented and the right to enforce aspects of Islamic law (*Shari'a*), which was partially implemented.

[10]   Two regional autonomy laws govern decentralization in Indonesia's other provinces (except Papua): Law No.22/1999 on 'Regional Government' and Law No.25/1999 on 'Fiscal Balance between the Central Government and the Regions.' These 1999 laws were amended by Laws No.32 and 33 of 2004 respectively.

resource revenues[11] and a substantial Special Autonomy Fund (*Dana Otonomi Khusus*). This fund derives from a central government discretionary block grant called a General Allocation Fund (*Dana Alokasi Umum*, DAU), which was created at the start of Indonesia's decentralization process with a view to reducing economic disparities between rich and poor regions. However, whereas Indonesia's other provinces each receive one per cent of the DAU, Aceh is entitled to an additional two per cent of the DAU for fifteen years under the LoGA to assist its recovery from the conflict and tsunami, which will be reduced to one per cent in the sixteenth to twentieth years (2023 to 2028).

Banda Aceh's role and responsibilities in the context of Indonesia's decentralization process differ markedly from those of Indonesia's other provincial administrations (except for Papua, which, like Aceh previously, has its own 'special autonomy' legislation). Under the LoGA, state power and resources are devolved directly to Banda Aceh's provincial administration before being redistributed amongst Aceh's twenty-one sub-provincial administrations. In contrast, decentralized state resources in other regions bypass the provincial administrative level and go directly to districts (*kabupaten*) and cities/ mayoralties (*kota*). That is, provincial governments elsewhere in Indonesia barely benefit from decentralization as ninety per cent of the General Allocation Fund (DAU) and eighty per cent of natural resource revenues are transferred directly to sub-provincial administrations.

These differentiated structures of decentralization have produced tremendous variations between Aceh and other parts of Indonesia in regards to the institutionalized power relationships between provincial and sub-provincial administrations, as well as in urban-rural relations. For instance, following the introduction of the 1999 regional autonomy laws that apply to the rest of the country, there were widespread reports of *bupati* (regents) and *walikota* (mayors) ignoring provincial administrations and behaving like 'mini-Suhartos' or 'little kings' through their misallocation of public funds and wavering commitment to the rule of law (Takeshi 2006: 146). As a result, amendments to the 1999 autonomy laws in 2004 aimed to at least partially redress this problem by introducing direct democratic local elections at the sub-provincial level to encourage more accountable and responsible local governance.[12]

In Aceh, a different set of problems were created by a bottleneck of decentralised state authority and resources at the provincial level. The LoGA was not the first legislation to devolve most state power and resources directly to Banda Aceh, as this system had been in place under Aceh's former special autonomy arrangement (Law No.18/2001). During the conflict, the primary beneficiaries of special autonomy were Banda Aceh's urban-based governing elite, whose financial mismanagement and costly 'vanity projects' earned Aceh an infamous reputation as the most corrupt province in one of the most corrupt countries in the world.[13] Yet Banda Aceh's discredited ruling elite were by no means the biggest obstacle to

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[11] Under the LoGA, Aceh is entitled to retain seventy per cent of oil and gas revenues generated within its borders, compared with the other provinces (except Papua), which receive fifteen per cent of oil profits and thirty per cent of natural gas revenues (Law No.25/1999). Aceh is also awarded eighty per cent of revenues in the forestry, fisheries, general mining and geothermal mining sectors, like Indonesia's other provinces.

[12] This attempt to make local government leaders more accountable to their constituents has only met with partial success at best, as shown, for example, by the ongoing prevalence of vote-buying in Indonesian election campaigns.

[13] This was the finding of two national corruption reports in 2003 produced by Bank Indonesia's Centre for Research and Education of Central Banking (PSPK), and the Economics Faculty of Padjajaran University (FE Unpad). See 'Korupsi di Aceh, Penduduk Miskin Meningkat', *Sinar Harapan*, 31 March 2003.

the implementation of special autonomy. Conflict-related factors such as massive infrastructural damage were generally regarded as the greatest impediments to decentralisation, along with Jakarta's refusal to release all of the revenues to which Aceh was entitled under special autonomy.[14]

Following the introduction of the LoGA, however, it was no longer possible to blame the shortcomings of self-government and decentralisation entirely on Jakarta or the conflict. Rather, as the Helsinki peace process gained ground and fortified peaceful centre-periphery relations between Aceh and Jakarta, Banda Aceh gradually supplanted Jakarta as the new 'centre' to which Aceh's sub-provincial administrations looked, both for development funds and to air their grievances. While Jakarta continued to largely honour its part of the implementation of the LoGA, whatever problems that arose within the context of self-government would be seen first and foremost as a matter internal to Aceh and not something that required outside involvement or intervention. As a new regional 'centre' (rather than as merely part of a Jakarta-centred polity's 'periphery'), however, Banda Aceh has encountered numerous challenges in its relations with other parts of Aceh. Direct democratic local executive elections held on 11 December 2006 brought to power a provincial government comprising former Acehnese rebels (from GAM as well as from Aceh's pro-referendum movement) who have so far enjoyed strong popular support. Yet despite its political legitimacy, the new Aceh administration has faced the unenviable task of rebuilding a province that has been devastated by two disasters- one man-made, the other natural- which have destroyed much of the provincial infrastructure and reduced large sections of the population to poverty.

Massive injections of foreign and Indonesian capital into Aceh since the tsunami (about US$8 billion in total)[15] have not dramatically reduced poverty, which remains far higher in Aceh than in the rest of Indonesia. Statistics from 2006 show 26.5 per cent of Acehnese living below the poverty line, compared with the national average of 17.8 per cent (World Bank 2008: 13). Poverty is a particular problem in Aceh's rural interior and remote districts (especially in Central and South Aceh), where over 30 per cent of rural households live below the poverty line. By comparison, less than 15 per cent of households in Aceh's urban areas are in poverty, with areas in and around Banda Aceh experiencing the lowest poverty levels. Little wonder, then, that post-tsunami, post-conflict Aceh has seen a continuation of traditional economic migration flows towards 'growth poles' in urban areas (*Ibid*: 8, 12).

Refuting the logic of traditional rural-to-urban migration in search of better living conditions, the most recent World Development Report (World Bank 2007) points out that the greatest decline in poverty (around the world, and especially in Asia) has been because of improved conditions in rural areas through agricultural revitalization. Aceh's provincial government, too, has made some attempts since the start of decentralisation to reduce rural-to-urban

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[14] A key problem under both the special autonomy law and the LoGA was that neither the Finance Ministry (which is responsible for collecting and redistributing revenues back to Aceh and Indonesia's other provinces) nor the stated-owned oil and gas companies in Aceh (namely, Pertamina and ExxonMobil Oil Indonesia) publicly disclosed the latter's profits, with the result that Aceh's political leadership did not know how much resource-generated revenues Aceh was entitled to receive.

[15] According to the World Bank, US$4.9 billion in projects and programs had been allocated for the post-tsunami reconstruction effort by June 2006 and an additional US$3.1 billion had been pledged, bringing the total reconstruction budget to about US$8 billion. Of these allocated projects, most were funded by donor organizations (US$2 billion) and NGOs (US$1.7 billion), while the Indonesian government contributed US$1.2 billion (World Bank 2006: xvi).

migration flows and generate sustainable employment in rural areas by reviving the agricultural sector. This has been especially challenging in Aceh, where a significant correlation exists between poverty and agriculture, which employs 50 per cent of the population as the main household occupation (World Bank 2008: 21). Aceh's governor, former GAM rebel Irwandi Yusuf, has sought to alleviate rural poverty and stimulate sustainable agricultural growth by pumping provincial government funding into oil palm plantations.[16] According to Irwandi, the benefits of oil palm are at least threefold:

> First, there is an endless demand for oil palm, so there will always be a market. Also, the Acehnese people are very bossy and lazy. If Acehnese can grow their own oil palm then they can run their own business. And, oil palm is a low maintenance crop that only needs tending twice a month, so for the rest of the time they can sit around doing nothing (interview, Banda Aceh, 10 April 2008).

While the environmental impact of Aceh's expanding oil palm plantations is already starting to be felt through deforestation[17], it is too soon to assess its effect on sustainable economic development and poverty alleviation in the rural interior. What is clear is that although Banda Aceh's provincial government has broadly identified rural development and pro-poor growth as a policy priority, Aceh's hinterlands continue to be mired by substantial structural constraints to long-term investment; the lives and livelihoods of villagers are still disrupted by widespread conflict and tsunami related infrastructural damage to roads and transportation, running water, electricity, irrigation and sanitation.

Decentralisation has also made few improvements to the uneven delivery of public services, especially in education and health. Education levels- which are linked to poverty- are substantially higher in Banda Aceh than elsewhere in Aceh. Like special autonomy before it, the LoGA requires Aceh's provincial government to spend at least thirty per cent of its increased budget on education. Public spending on education has quadrupled under decentralisation, and Aceh has the second highest per capita education expenditure in Indonesia (World Bank 2008: 42). Yet the education system in remote and rural areas has seen few improvements. This is partly because after the 2004 tsunami donors and aid agencies prioritised education programs in Aceh's coastal urban areas, where some 2,000 school teachers and more than 200 university lecturers died, disrupting the education of about 180,000 students. However, donors and Aceh's provincial government alike have been slow to rebuild educational facilities in rural conflict-affected areas. During the conflict, more than ninety per cent of children in Banda Aceh were enrolled in schools, compared with West and North Aceh, where school attendance rates of sixty-two per cent and thirty-nine per cent respectively were the lowest in Indonesia (World Food Program 2002). In these areas, conflict related factors (such as the burning of hundreds of schools by unknown arsonists, intimidation or killing of teachers, internal displacement of families, and children dropping out of school because they were orphaned), as well as poverty and inadequate access to schools were the most common reasons for poor attendance rates. In the post-conflict era, sporadic and delayed post-conflict reconstruction, ongoing poverty, lack of access to

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[16] This strategy was inspired partly by the experience of Malaysia's Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA), which, from the 1950s, expanded agricultural production and alleviated rural poverty through the resettlement of mostly landless Malays onto land newly opened for cultivation.

[17] Land degradation and conversion point to future problems associated with rural poverty and reduced economic opportunities (Budidarsono et al. 2007: 35).

education and teacher absenteeism and shortages are the primary causes. Although there are enough teachers in Aceh, many do not want to work in under-resourced and remote parts of Aceh and have not been offered financial incentives to do so.

A similar gap exists between Banda Aceh and other parts of the province in the health sector. While Aceh spends less on health than most Indonesian provinces (six per cent), this nonetheless translates into a high per capita health budget because of Aceh's funding increases under the LoGA. This helps to explain, for example, why the number of healthcare providers in Aceh exceeds the national average (World Bank 2008: 42). But like Aceh's teachers, health professionals have not been offered proper incentives to live and work in remote and rural areas, many of which lack appropriate health facilities and services.

Beyond its negligible contribution to reducing urban-rural economic imbalances, decentralisation has brought a number of symbolic and cultural changes to Banda Aceh that have not travelled widely to rural parts of the province, despite the high degree of freedom of movement under the Helsinki peace process. For instance, the introduction of Islamic law under decentralisation, which applies to 98 per cent of Aceh's provincial population who are Muslim, legally requires Acehnese Muslim women to wear Islamic headscarves (*jilbab*). Yet this is largely an urban phenomenon and is most visible around Banda Aceh where *Shari'a* enforcement agencies have the strongest physical presence. In comparison, many Acehnese Muslim women in villages wear looser headscarves (*selendang*) or leave their hair uncovered. Street signs in Arabic text, which began appearing in Aceh after the start of Islamic law, are likewise mainly confined to Banda Aceh and a handful of urban centres along the east coast, but are rarely seen at the village level.

Although Aceh's self-governing status has thus far done little towards reducing urban-rural disparities in the redistribution of human and material resources, the peacetime conditions under which decentralisation is currently being implemented have at least enabled greater freedom of movement and expression. Banda Aceh residents who were too afraid to travel to rural areas during the conflict now journey to villages to visit friends and relatives, and for business. While Acehnese living in rural and remote parts of the province still travel to Banda Aceh and other urban areas in search of employment and better living conditions- just as they did during the conflict- those who remain behind now look to the provincial administration in Banda Aceh instead of Jakarta for improvements to their localised living conditions in terms of the provision of public services, facilities and employment opportunities.

How this re-centering of Banda Aceh plays out in the political imaginings and practical realities of inter-Aceh relations will depend, in the first instance, upon Jakarta's ongoing resolve to honour its commitment to the LoGA. It will then depend on the extent to which Aceh's provincial administration is responsive to the needs and aspirations of sub-provincial administrations and their residents. If Banda Aceh is sensitive to the expectations of its constituents at the sub-provincial level- or is perceived as such- then urban-rural relations, as well as urban-urban relations (between Banda Aceh and Aceh's other urban centres) are likely to improve. Conversely, if Acehnese living in other parts of the province feel as though

their political and economic development needs and interests are being marginalised or neglected by Banda Aceh, then new forms of horizontal conflict could easily manifest.[18]

These political and economic considerations aside, within the context of Aceh's post-conflict environment there are many subtle and less tangible implications for the revival of interactions and networks between Banda Aceh and other parts of the province. How will Acehnese identity and culture be affected by the renewal of travel and communication flows between urban and rural areas? What forms of 'Acehneseness' will emerge and disappear as a result of dissolving barriers between Banda Aceh and the rural interior? How will the character and appearance of Banda Aceh continue to change through infusions of the rural into urban spaces? What can rural and urban Acehnese survivors learn from one another by sharing their diverging and overlapping experiences of the conflict and tsunami? And, how will these new forms of engagement help people come to terms with and make sense of their intertwined histories of social trauma? These are questions that have so far been glossed over in the rebuilding of Aceh. Yet such questions are becoming increasingly relevant as the self-government of Aceh looks less towards the outside world for help (and to blame for its problems), and more toward factors internal to the protection of Aceh's hard-won peace and newfound sense of renewal.

CONCLUSION

Few urban environments in recent history have been exposed to as much upheaval as Banda Aceh. Since 1998, the city has oscillated wildly between war and peace: from New Order repression to the post-authoritarian climate of democratic openness to military and civil emergency rule to the current Helsinki peace process. In addition to these dramatic transformations, Banda Aceh has been flattened by the biggest natural disaster in living memory and subsequently totally rebuilt.

We have considered in this paper the understudied role played by Banda Aceh and its residents in the remaking of Aceh through the conflict, tsunami and decentralisation. Looking beyond Aceh's often fraught relations with outsiders, we have highlighted complex divisions and interrelations between the Acehnese themselves. In this, our paper has at least partially sought to deconstruct simplistic standardised representations of the Acehnese as a homogenous grouping with a uniform set of needs and expectations; ironically, this is how the Acehnese have been most commonly portrayed by those who have done the most to help them in the large-scale post-tsunami reconstruction effort.

In particular, we have shown how Acehnese living in Banda Aceh and people in rural areas have experienced the conflict, tsunami and decentralisation very differently from one another. During the conflict, Banda Aceh residents were generally exposed to far less violence than people living in the rural interior, thus leading to the production of different memories and accounts of that period from within Aceh itself. Similarly, proximity to the 2004 tsunami

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[18] This could even manifest into heightened demands for partition, as has already been shown through the demands by a locally-based 'ALA-ABAS' movement for the partition of Aceh into three separate provinces. As an interviewee at the Ministry of Home Affairs put it, 'I said to Aceh colleagues, be careful. When you treat the *kabupaten* [districts] and *kota* [cities/mayoralties] disproportionately, you will be in trouble because the southeast Aceh will say, "why we should obey to Aceh, we are not so Acehnese, we should make our own province" – that's the danger. As long as there is no prosperity approach, I'm afraid it will happen like that' (Director, Regional Government Affairs, MOHA, Jakarta, 15 January 2008).

produced divergent geohistories between individual Acehnese, as did place of residency at the time of the natural disaster (in urban or rural coastal areas or the interior), which affected levels of access to post-disaster resources. The benefits of decentralisation, too, have been felt more strongly by people living in Banda Aceh and other urban centres than by Acehnese living in rural or remote areas, many of whom have so far experienced hardly any advantages of self-government.

How, then, should these diverging geographies lead us to view the transformation of Banda Aceh? On the one hand, they illustrate the comparatively privileged position of Banda Aceh within Aceh as the area least affected by the conflict and as the biggest beneficiary of post-tsunami reconstruction and decentralisation resources. These combined factors have helped to establish Banda Aceh as the new 'centre' of self-government, replacing its former reputation as the troublesome 'periphery' of Jakarta. On the other hand, the uneven distribution of state and non-state resources in Banda Aceh's favour should serve as a reminder of the heightened potential for future horizontal conflict with other parts of Aceh. Political elites in Banda Aceh have many reasons for seeking to address spatial imbalances through prioritizing development and public services in rural and remote areas. Apart from the spectre of violence and/or resuscitation of demands for partition, rural areas remain important sources of votes for former GAM candidates in provincial elections. Like many other aspects of Aceh's transformation, this suggests the importance of adopting an 'integrated rural-urban approach' (Parthasarathy, 2010).

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