

## Acehnese

### Profile

Acehnese are mainly found in Aceh, in the northernmost region of the island of Sumatra. They number between 890,000 (Indonesia Census, 2000) and perhaps as many as 3 million, and their language is a member of the Aceh-Chamic group of languages, part of the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian family, more closely related to Malay than it is to Javanese.

They are most famous for their devout adherence to Islam and their militant resistance to external rule. The Acehnese family system is based on a separation of male and female spheres of activity. Males are directed outward towards the world of trade through the practice of merantau – going away from one's birthplace to seek one's fortune and gain new knowledge and experience. Females are encouraged to stay at home and perform the traditional family roles. However, this practice has meant that increasing numbers of men have failed to return to the Acehnese homeland, but have instead married and settled elsewhere.

### Historical context

The Acehnese minority's history explains their distinctive traits and their separateness from Indonesia. This ethnic group has long been established in this part of South-East Asia, probably part of the Malay wave of migrants which began to settle there some 3,000 years ago. They developed their distinct language and culture, first as part of the creation of Hindu political entities in the region. The arrival of Islam, sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth century, led to the emergence of the Sultanate of Aceh which became a powerful independent state, expanding at one point as far as southern Thailand and Johor in the Malay Peninsula. By the sixteenth century, it was the strongest power in the Malacca Straits region. It remained unconquered by the Dutch colonial administration which ruled the rest of the Indonesian archipelago until the early years of the twentieth century. Acehnese rebels resisted the Japanese occupation during the Second World War, and then sided with the new Indonesian republic that fought the return of the Dutch between 1945 and 1949.

However the replacement in 1950 of the federal system negotiated with the Dutch as a condition for Indonesian independence, with a centralized state that was dominated by Java, helped increase demands in Aceh for outright independence. In 1953, under the leadership of Daud Beureueh, Aceh declared itself an independent state governed by Islamic law, part of a wider Islamic movement against the secular central government known as Darul Islam. A 1959 truce by which Aceh – and the Acehnese minority – were granted a 'special status' ended the conflict, but resentment over the limited nature of Aceh's 'special status' persisted, especially after the authoritarian General Suharto sidelined, and eventually replaced, President Sukarno in 1966.

The tensions came to a head in the 1970s, when Indonesian central government authorized the exploitation of Aceh's natural resources by multinational oil and gas companies, with the profits going mainly to Jakarta, and not Aceh, which remained one of the least developed provinces in Indonesia. In

addition to losing land – and often being inadequately compensated – the Acehnese saw most of the employment and other benefits linked to the exploitation of ‘their’ resources going to the Javanese and other non-Acehnese. A new rebel movement (GAM – the Free Aceh Movement) arose in that decade, and proclaimed Aceh Independence in 1976.

Over the next two decades Aceh was subjected to operations by the Indonesian security forces which weakened the GAM, but also provoked strong anti-Indonesian feeling among many Acehnese who bore the brunt of the military’s repression. From 1989 Aceh was categorized as a Daerah Operasi Militer (DOM), a Special Military Region. Access to the province by outsiders was restricted, allowing the military to conduct a campaign of murder and abductions which cost an estimated 2,000 lives by 1998. At the same time, an increasing influx of non-Acehnese brought in through the government’s transmigrasi programme also increased the level of discontent.

The fall of the Suharto regime in May 1998 allowed the Acehnese to express their anger over the military’s abuses openly for the first time. The secret graves of the victims were exhumed, and large demonstrations took place demanding a referendum on independence. Unlike East Timor, the Acehnese enjoyed considerable sympathy among the wider Indonesian Muslim population, and the army was forced to apologize in September 1998, and withdraw some units. However, also unlike East Timor, Aceh was an internationally recognized part of Indonesia, and few politicians in Jakarta were willing to consider Acehnese demands for independence for fear it would encourage similar demands in other parts of the archipelago. Clashes between well-armed GAM fighters and the army and police escalated, and successive governments in Jakarta authorized more military operations that resulted in further civilian casualties, and large-scale displacement of the population into camps.

In 2001, the Indonesian government agreed to extend some additional autonomy powers to the province (though mainly in the application of Sharia law and the right to receive direct foreign investment). This opening was accompanied by continued military repression, and a state of emergency was declared in 2003 in another attempt to crush the separatist movement. The scale of the tsunami disaster that struck Aceh in December 2004 changed everything. Much of the coastal region, where most of the population lives, was devastated, and 168,000 people lost their lives. Indonesia and GAM signed a peace deal on 15 August 2005, which again greatly expanded Aceh’s autonomy status, and in the December 2006 elections for governor and the March 2007 elections for the provincial and district levels, most of the successful candidates were supporters of the Acehnese rebel movement or their cause.

## **Current issues**

Though the destruction brought about by the 2004 tsunami will take many years to repair, and reconstruction in Aceh has been plagued by corruption and incompetence, on the positive side the 2005 peace agreement and the 2006 and 2007 elections have drastically altered the legal and political framework of Aceh and the situation of the Acehnese minority. As the Acehnese minority make up about 50 per cent of the population of the province (and perhaps more as there are reports that some non-Acehnese migrants who had settled as part of the Indonesian transmigrasi programme have left), they appear to be able to exercise effective control over their province’s government and the policies in economic, social and cultural fields that could better ensure respect for their rights. In theory, they should also be able to have access to the wealth created by the exploitation of the province’s oil and gas resources, as the 2005 peace agreement is supposed to result in Aceh’s authorities keeping 70 per cent of that wealth.

While these are all hopeful developments, they are only beginning to be put into place, and the next few years will determine the extent to which Jakarta is willing to give up real authority and power over Aceh. In the past the central government has repeatedly committed itself to some form of autonomy for

the province – only to reverse its position later.

In particular, it remains to be seen whether the new autonomy powers of the Acehnese minority will allow them to resist Jakarta's constitutional powers in areas where their interests conflict, such as with regard to logging, mining or palm oil plantations, or even the transmigrasi programme, which has been maintained on a smaller scale by the central government. It's also unclear whether the Acehnese will be able to displace ethnic Javanese who hold a disproportionate number of good jobs in the province: in 1990, more than half of top positions in urban areas (professionals, government officials, etc.) were held by non-Acehnese.