

“Under a Rebel Flag: Social Resistance under Insurgent Rule in Indonesia”

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By 2001, rebel forces in Aceh, Indonesia had established considerable control over several ethnic Acehnese districts. Their flag flew openly, despite continued pressure from Indonesian forces. They accomplished this in large part due to their tremendous popularity in these districts, as well as the antipathy that many Acehnese villagers held towards an abusive Indonesian military. However, rebel popularity did not provide them with a *carte blanche* to do as they pleased. Part of the rebel agenda was to rid the province of ethnic Javanese settlers, even those who were born in Aceh and who had integrated into local society. On one occasion, several rebels arrived in a village to evict a local Islamic teacher of Javanese origins. When they tried to force him out, his students protested, surrounding their teacher in prayer and defying the rebels. As the teacher was removed by force and his house burned down, the community came together, with Acehnese Islamic leaders leading sermons focusing on overcoming tribalism. After continued pressure, Commanders issued a formal apology (interviews in Aceh Besar, January 2008 and July 2014).

This and several similar instances might be surprising for some, who see conflict as anarchic. For others, popular rebel forces should face limited criticism, and some may suspect that those challenging rebel forces are supporting the state. Violent conflicts feature extreme threats to those wishing to speak or act up, providing limited space for nonviolent resistance. But even in times of war, civilians find ways to resist. Such instances are not typically the stuff of broad social movements, but they also can go beyond smaller, barely visible acts of everyday resistance. To provide a more nuanced understanding of wartime resistance, I suggest a broader lens of social resistance, picking up not only oppositional forms of resistance such as the

example above, but also less oppositional forms of resistance such as small-scale criticism / feedback and transforming armed groups from within. Focusing on the now resolved secessionist conflict in Aceh, I show how civilians were able to resist popular rebel forces, taking great risks to raise their voices and shape the course of war.

Understanding Social Resistance

In many ways, some level of resistance is a natural human condition, as people speak out in hopes of improving their lives. Silence may be less natural, manufactured by powerful political forces. Such forces are rarely completely effective though, and this is where we begin to speak of various forms of resistance. Everyday resistance, popularized by the influential anthropologist James C. Scott, refers to minor, uncoordinated, and barely visible acts through which less powerful actors pilfer, sabotage, lampoon, and slow down more powerful political forces. More visible forms of resistance take part through social movements, more coordinated, public efforts to allow expression and provoke change. This is the stuff of boycotts, strikes, marches, protests, and more.

Although important, these approaches necessarily miss some forms of resistance. As noted in the introduction, localized, spontaneous yet still public and collective efforts might be overlooked by such lenses. The same can be said for less oppositional forms of resistance. Engagement, or feedback, entails statements related to performance, typically provided individually but sometimes offered collectively. Engagement can be provided in venues provided by those holding power or in neutral sites. It can be provided in an effort to improve those in power or to criticize them. In politics, this form of resistance can be found through ombudspersons, advisors, and editorialists. In civil wars, this might play in many forms. Civilians might talk to individual combatants in a personal capacity, perhaps at checkpoints or through social spheres. Societal leaders may request an audience with Commanders, providing an opportunity to provide feedback and shape the behaviour of powerful actors. Such micro-le-

vel advisory phenomena are not necessarily oppositional, and certainly not confrontational, but nonetheless provide avenues through which civilians can resist and shape the agendas of armed groups.

Another form of non-opposition resistance is more visible, although often overlooked. Political power is rarely monolithic, typically including a range of social forces and other interests that pull in different directions and shape the identity / policies of the broader group. Sometimes, social forces such as lobbies or special interest are able to determine the agenda. This is no different in the context of civil wars. Armed groups rarely seek simply to control territory—most seek to govern it in some way. To do this, they must establish some sort of civilian administration, especially in terms of taxation and logistics, as well as other functions such as education and creating infrastructure. To do this, state and rebel forces need unarmed allies, providing opportunities for resistance within a given group. Armed groups might reach out to business leaders, religious networks, or student groups, forming a broader movement connected to their armed wing. The result is that the vision and identity of a particular armed group might be transformed, an important avenue to resist state and rebel groups from within.

Social resistance thus provides a broad lens, incorporating oppositional forms of resistance such as everyday resistance and collective defiance, as well as all points in between. Additionally, it includes less oppositional forms of resistance such as engagement and internal transformation. Beyond the extent to which resistance is blatantly oppositional, another way to understand this is in terms of visibility. Engagement and weapons of the weak are typically smaller, more covert acts that not visible at higher levels. Meanwhile, defiance and internal transformation are more overt, easier to see. All told, social resistance provides a useful way to approach politics, especially in the context of armed conflicts where it may be difficult to observe traditional forms of resistance, and where resistance may be in short supply.

Wartime Resistance

Although we should not exaggerate the ease of mounting successful social resistance in democracies, democratic systems by definition allow some space for voice. Social resistance is typically more difficult and dangerous in non-democratic settings. Authoritarian systems nonetheless see various forms of resistance, sometimes when muted criticisms build up and spill over at a time of regime weakness. What about in armed conflict, an extremely violent context? Here, the costs of resistance may be extremely high, with those who speak out facing death. Speaking up against one side might be seen as supporting the other, leading to high and sometimes unpredictable levels of violence. Neither state nor rebel forces tend to take kindly to challenges, as each may claim to speak for the people, so we should expect violent reprisals against various forms of resistance.

Scholarly and media investigations have largely focused on the high levels of threat that civilians face in armed conflicts, and rightfully so. However, they have overlooked another factor—contestation. By definition, armed conflicts lack control by either side, so that there is no singular agenda or vision dominating societal groups. This is one reason why violence can be so intense, as armed groups are seeking control and lack quality information on local allegiances. But this also means that neither side enjoys anything approaching hegemony. Each side tends to commit some level of abuses, giving ample reason for people to want to speak out. Because political power is contested and no agenda dominates, we should expect many opportunities for resistance in armed conflict, although such resistance will be high-stakes.

For some, armed rebellion represents the ultimate form of resistance. Although this may be true, armed rebels also generate their own injustices and seek to establish quasi-state rule. This paper focuses only on unarmed, civilian resistance. If we understand armed rebellion as resistance, we help states justify targeting civil society forces (allowing them to see rebels and activists as one in the same) and are blind to the possibility of independent resistance against rebel groups.

We have no reason to assume that rebel groups will respond to critics any differently than do authoritarian states, eliminating those who challenge them. When rebel groups commit human rights abuses or other forms of injustice, it is understandable that local people will have something to say about it.

Secessionism in Aceh

Located on the northwestern tip of Sumatra, pointing towards the Indian Ocean, Aceh has a long history as an independent Sultanate and a centre of Islamic learning. After decades of anti-colonial resistance against Dutch forces, Aceh played a key role in the Indonesian independence movement. As Indonesian leaders centralized power in the vast country in the 1950s, Aceh joined a pan-Indonesia Islamic rebellion demanding regional autonomy. Just over a decade later, a local businessman declared Acehnese independence and created what would become the Free Aceh Movement (GAM: Gerakan Aceh Merdeka). The rebellion was initially short-lived, but after some training in Libya, resurfaced in the late 1980s. This prompted Indonesian forces to crack down, as Aceh was now essentially ruled by the Indonesian army. With the fall of Suharto and the weakening of the Indonesian military in 1998, Aceh was in full rebellion. GAM finally emerged as a popular movement, and by 2001 came to control several districts in the north of the province. Its popularity was not uniform across the province though, as ethnic minority districts resisted GAM's ethnonationalism and sided with Indonesian forces. However, in the Acehnese heartland, GAM enjoyed tremendous support. After a series of peace talks, the conflict was finally overcome in 2005 after a disastrous tsunami. Rebels formed a local political party and accepted meaningful autonomy within a now democratic Indonesia, laying down arms and becoming the provincial government.

It would be easy to provide examples of Acehnese resistance against Indonesian forces or of minority resistance against GAM. However it would not be clear whether this would represent resi-

stance against one side or support for the other side. Acehnese resistance against Indonesia occurred in rebel strongholds and minority resistance against GAM unfolded in state strongholds. Most acts of resistance in war may also represent support for the dominant local power. Clearer, and more surprising cases of civilian resistance, where such actions were not protected or encouraged by the other side, are those that took place against the interests dominant local armed group. In this case, the below discussion focuses on social resistance against GAM forces within ethnic Acehnese districts controlled by the rebels.

Engagement represents an under-appreciated form of resistance. In times of war, even providing feedback and criticism can be dangerous, threatening individual soldiers or the reputation of armed groups. Despite this, Acehnese civilians spoke out to / against GAM in several ways. Some were in institutions controlled by the rebels. GAM Commanders published cell phone numbers and requested civilian feedback, ostensibly to weed out 'fake' GAM units, but also to allow Commanders to monitor the behavior of their troops. GAM also created the Ulee Sagoe, a sort of civilian ombudsperson. Most Ulee Sagoe were students, those who wanted to support GAM but did not want to take up arms. Acehnese villagers report feeling more comfortable providing criticisms to civilian GAM members; "we would criticize GAM to GAM civilians, who would take our complaints to Commanders that were more reasonable than soldiers" (interviews in Bireuen, November 2007). The most important form of engagement did not take place in venues controlled by GAM. Aceh's village chiefs have long histories of representing their villages and the people residing within them. These chiefly norms transferred to the conflict. When GAM arrived in a given village, Commanders would typically sit down with chiefs, who sometimes used the opportunity to criticize GAM behavior, and more often tried to communicate the difficult circumstances they faced in the conflict. Another role played by chiefs was serving as a sort of lawyer for detained villagers. Chiefs might provide an alibi or context for a villager's actions, or request a

suspect be released to his care. This role was sometimes dangerous for chiefs, and did not always succeed, but nevertheless provided a venue for dialogue and voice in the conflict.

The Free Aceh Movement was never a cohesive, homogeneous rebel force. At its origins, it was led by businessmen and recruited through kinship and veteran's networks from the Darul Islam Rebellion. In the 1980s, it expanded by absorbing various criminal elements, delivering greater capacity for violence, but at the cost of its reputation. At the height of the conflict, various societal forces aligned with the rebels, both supporting the rebel cause as well as shaping the meaning of rebellion. The two most important such groups were student activists and Islamic leaders. Educated at Indonesian universities, Acehnese activists were originally part of the national democracy movement, and in Aceh, led human rights and referendum campaigns. As the military cracked down on all dissent, many student activists sided with the rebels. GAM provided them with protection, while the students provided GAM with civilian personnel and new channels of public relations. But this alliance was also transformative, as activists downplayed human rights in place of Acehnese ethnonationalism, and GAM shifted their language to incorporate human rights and democracy. This was no small change, as GAM had demanded a Sultanate for years and had rarely mentioned human rights, but now shifted its message and even made several human rights declarations. GAM also aligned with various Islamic leaders, with similar results. GAM was traditionally a secularist group, and traditional ulama had long shunned politics. Indonesian assaults brought the two together. Islamic leaders were able to promote a version of Sharia Law through GAM, helping the rebels to operate courts and schools, as well as serve as advisors. Again, the content of rebellion shifted as civilians pursued their agendas from within the rebel movement.

Other forms of social resistance were more oppositional, undermining GAM regardless of perception. Many civilians utilized forms of everyday resistance against the rebels. One of the

most important forms of resistance was flight, as young men fled the Aceh province to find economic opportunities, but also to avoid recruitment. Ordinary Acehnese also used slander against the rebels, joking and gossiping about the group's shady criminal connections and eccentric leaders. Everyday resistance was especially useful in souring the fruits of involuntary collaboration. In Bireuen, women report serving lower quality and poorly seasoned food to GAM rebels who demanded meals. One woman explained how she used to allow GAM to hide weapons under her outdoor hearth, but as she grew tired and unappreciated, would boil water overnight so it was too hot to use (interviews in Bireuen, October 2007 and July 2014). Perhaps the most important weapon of the weak was desertion. As the conflict ground to a halt, GAM faced many of its recruits wishing to return home. As one woman reported, "I told my sons to return. The conflict was not ending and we needed to get on with our lives. Many women told their sons and husbands this. It was time to come home." GAM had a difficult time facing this challenge, at first trying to force its soldiers to fight, but eventually accepting this as temporary leave. This nonetheless weakened the rebels leading up to the 2005 peace talks.

Covert acts of everyday resistance chipped away at rebel capacity, but stopped short of confrontation. There are only a few examples of civilians openly defying the rebels, but these examples remain important indicators of public sentiment and civilian agency. Examples include GAM demanding that Acehnese villagers boycott state schools and state elections, demands that many villagers refused to follow, leading GAM to resort to violence. As noted in the introduction, the primary instance of civilian defiance related to violence against Javanese transmigrants and their descendants. Contrary to many reports, Aceh was never a major recipient of state transmigration from the heavily populated island of Java, with Javanese settling mostly in southern Sumatra. Aceh's Javanese population peaked at about 12% of the province's 4 million residents, most of whom resided in the non-Acehnese interior of the province. GAM had long rallied against

Javanese colonialism and was responsible for significant anti-Javanese violence, which they saw as necessary to purify the province. Ordinary Acehnese, however, had few problems with their Javanese neighbours, so GAM pogroms ignited resistance. In one instance, GAM kicked out several long-time Javanese residents of one village, including the village coroner. Villagers blocked GAM from attacking their homes, and soon a different, more popular GAM Commander was invited by the villagers to negotiate. As the Commander explained to me, “The people explained that these are not even Javanese any more, that Aceh has always assimilated other people. I agreed to let them stay, but the villagers wanted more. They wanted me to sign a letter guaranteeing it. So I did it—I wanted to show we are reasonable” (interview in Bireuen, February 2008).

The diverse forms of civilian resistance noted above demonstrate that, even in war, those without weapons continue to express themselves, even to a popular rebel group. Of course, the same populations resisted Indonesian forces even more. And GAM did not always take kindly to social resistance, and in some cases killed or otherwise punished those challenging them. But for the most part, Acehnese rebels adapted in an effort to maintain its popularity. This speaks to the importance of contestation, as GAM was in a competition for public sympathy with an increasingly democratic Indonesian state. Social resistance in Aceh generated significant results, saving lives and pushing the rebels to adopt new codes of conduct. GAM encountered widespread resistance to their long-standing demand to cleanse the province of Javanese, resistance heard from discussions with individual civilians and civilian advisors, from student activists and Islamic leaders, and defiant villagers. With the help of student activists, in 2003 GAM published a declaration that proclaimed a multiethnic vision, recognizing ethnic Javanese. This profound shift was a clear response to social resistance, moderating the rebel forces.

Conclusions

This paper has shown that, even in war, ordinary people find ways to mount various forms of social resistance. The varied forms of resistance found in Aceh went beyond small acts of everyday resistance and larger social movements, including actions not visible without a wider lens. Approaching armed conflicts or other high-pressure environments through this broader concept of resistance shows a vibrancy of resistance, and a popular struggle to improve things despite the risks in doing so.