

The Nobel Prize for Ahtisaari and Aceh

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Today in Oslo, Finland's former President Martti Ahtisaari, leading diplomat and social democrat, is awarded the Nobel Prize for his outstanding contributions to peace building. The remarkable achievement in Aceh toward peace, democracy and reconstruction was a major case in point. While an inevitable drawback of the Prize is the focus on individuals, the benefit is the opportunity to draw attention to the more complicated dynamics that we may learn from.

What enabled peace in Aceh? One of the common explanations is that GAM had been weakened militarily. Another is that the tsunami-disaster made everybody focus on more urgent matters than fighting. Yet another is that the newly elected Presidents in Jakarta, Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono and Jusuf Kalla, were committed to decentralisation and negotiated peace. Also, many argue, Ahtisaari was innovative and forceful enough to get the process on track.

Comparative studies reveal, however, that rebel groups may well continue to cause serious problems for their adversaries even if they lose in the battlefields. The Indonesian army must have learnt that lesson in East Timor. Moreover, the same tsunami-disaster as in Aceh did not foster peace in Sri Lanka but struggle for control of relief and reconstruction. Presidents Yudhoyono and Kalla were indeed important, but their similar policies in other disturbed areas had generated less peace and democracy. Also, Ahtisaari's vital contribution was during a brief part of a process which was already under way and continued well beyond the signing of the MoU in Helsinki.

From a comparative point of view again, six factors stand out instead as unique and crucial for the progress in Aceh. Interestingly, they all relate to democracy. First, the fledgling democratisation in Indonesia, with freedoms and civil and political rights in addition to elections and with strong emphasis on decentralisation. This countered the process of disintegration of the country, which had been a prerequisite for the separatist strategy. Those in favour of political solutions gained ground. Sri Lanka's centralism and deteriorating democracy was in sharp contrast. Second, the people in Aceh identified themselves more politically and territorially than in relation to ethnic and religious communities. This was different from both Sri Lanka and other disturbed areas in Indonesia. Third, while the tsunami-disaster itself did not foster peace, it dismantled the iron curtain around Aceh; and the donors called for basic measures to contain the Indonesian plague of capital accumulation through coercion, favouritism and corruption. Fourth, the new regime in Jakarta wanted to display good behaviour and attract foreign collaboration and investments. Fifth, it was in this context that Ahtisaari's concept worked so well. Very few of the conflicts involved were 'managed' or 'resolved'. Rather, an agreement was reached to transform them from the battlefield to a democratic framework. A democratic framework based on equal political and civic rights, including freedom to participate through even independent candidates and local parties to thus build regional self government. Hence, all stakeholders would be included and get a fair chance to handle problems and conflicts. Finally, these arrangements were to the benefit of the democracy oriented sections of the Aceh nationalists. They gained ground and became crucial to the success. By contrast to the pro-democrats in Indonesia 1998, they were

capable of utilising the new opportunities, especially to nominate candidates in elections, form local parties and even win elections.

On the one hand, therefore, Aceh with Ahtisaari refuted the increasingly common conclusion among donors and politicians around the world (as well as in Poso and Ambon) that there is a general need to constrain and 'sequence democracy' because 'too much' freedoms and elections seems to generate more conflicts and abuse of power. On the other hand, however, this does not mean that Aceh provides unconditional support for the idea of 'liberal peace', based on liberal democracy and liberal markets. Rather the peace was 'social democratic' in character by being based on strong politics, democratisation beyond centralism and elitism, regulation of business, democracy as a mean to transform conflicts, and the capacity of pro-democrats to use and improve the new institutions.

Can this positive process be sustained or will Aceh slide into problems similar to those in other post-colonial processes like East Timor? The standard formulation in Aceh today is 'transition'. Most problems including preferential treatment and outright favouritism are explained in terms of the need for transitional arrangements. Such arrangements are needed. But empirical evidence from democracy survey data and follow up interviews indicate that the transition is getting increasingly 'frameless'. It is not clear from where and to what one is transiting and how long it will take. And few discuss what transitional measures and practices that may turn permanent problems.

In other words, the initial democratic framework must be improved to handle a number of new challenges. These include the need to foster citizenship beyond political community only. Also, Aceh must be protected from integration into Indonesian collusion, corruption and nepotism, a particularly urgent issue when donors phase out their work. And it is essential to foster broad issue and interest organisations, as well as democratic forms for popular participation towards impartial government services, to reform elitist parties and counter unequal patronage and clientelism.

If the celebration of Ahtisaari as an exceptionally tall Nobel laureate thus helps to also point to the democratic framework that fostered peace in Aceh *and* to the urgency of sustaining and improving it, the Prize has served a vital cause.

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