



## Study of Internal Conflict (SOIC) Case Studies

Researcher: Ali Sina Sharifi  
Study Acceptance Date: June 2023  
Study Sequence No. 51

### Indonesia (Aceh 1976–2005)

#### Executive Summary

Indonesia, a former Dutch colony, experienced three decades of conflict from 1976 to 2005 between the government and separatists in Aceh province on the northern tip of Sumatra island. The ethnic Acehnese comprise 1.4 percent of the Indonesian population.<sup>1</sup> Historically, Aceh was an independent Muslim sultanate before it was defeated by the Dutch in 1903, and it is still largely Muslim-dominated.<sup>2</sup>

After independence, the New Order government, under President Suharto from the 1960s to the late 1990s, followed an economic strategy that developed Aceh into a significant resource—however, the Acehnese did not benefit from their resources. For example, during the 1980s, Aceh contributed \$2–3 billion annually to the Indonesian national revenue, while receiving approximately \$85 million in return from the central government.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the transmigration to Aceh of the Javanese, a larger ethnic population, and the emergence of non-Acehnese political leaders in Aceh led to distrust in the government and the rise of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka / GAM) led by Acehnese political figure Teungku Hasan di Tiro in 1976, which the government immediately suppressed.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1970s, the Indonesian military targeted Acehnese civilians and a limited number of GAM members, and di Tiro and other GAM leaders were forced into exile.<sup>5</sup> This persecution generated support for the second and third rebirths of the GAM with more active members and external sanctuary and support, particularly from Libya.<sup>6</sup> Better-trained GAM insurgents used “hit-and-run” tactics on non-Acehnese migrants and the military, and in return, Indonesian soldiers launched counterinsurgency operations that tortured and killed thousands of GAM members and civilians.<sup>7</sup>

The three phases of the conflict were as follows.<sup>8</sup>

Organization	Years	Active Members	Casualties
GAM I	1976–79	25–200	>100
GAM II	1989–91	200–750	2,000–10,000
GAM III	1999–2005	15,000–27,000	4.363

GAM reemerged in 1999, at the end of Suharto’s New Order government. Suharto’s successors adopted a “talk and fight” strategy of maintaining military pressure on the insurgents in Aceh while opening a channel for negotiations. Although many exiled GAM members returned to the province, support for GAM gradually lessened. What finally paved the way for peace was the devastating 2004 tsunami that hit the Aceh region, killing an estimated 160,000 people.<sup>9</sup> This natural disaster pushed ideals of separatism to the background. Following an attempt to get international humanitarian aid for the region, GAM members signed a peace agreement in Helsinki in 2005.<sup>10</sup> Since then, no major conflict has occurred in the province.

## Assessing the Five Factors

### 1. Was the country at the time of the conflict a nation?

**Yes.** Indonesian nationalist groups had established a distinct presence in the country's politics by the time of the Japanese occupation in World War II.<sup>11</sup> While the Republic of Indonesia has faced challenges in uniting the diverse ethnicities and regions of Indonesia, scholars largely agree national sentiment was and is widespread.<sup>12</sup> Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, adopted the political philosophy of Pancasila (Five Principles) at independence in 1949, guaranteeing freedom of religion and prioritizing national identity. Sukarno's policy of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity) fostered this philosophy-turned-into-policy through public education and media messaging.<sup>13</sup> According to Professor of Indonesian history Henk Schulte Nordholt, nationalism in Indonesia was at a peak in 1950.<sup>14</sup> According to Nordholt, a grassroots movement of local leaders led the effort to unify Indonesia into one state.<sup>15</sup> Suharto, Sukarno's successor, continued this state emphasis on national identity, using education and mass literacy programs to propagate Bahasa Indonesia, the national language, and to unify the country's ethnic groups.<sup>16</sup> Despite the authoritarianism and corruption that plagued his 30 years in power, Suharto's New Order policies encouraged and reinforced national identity. Additionally, Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world, and this common religion has also contributed to a sense of national identity in Indonesia since independence. In 1969, the Indonesian population was 87.1 percent Muslim.<sup>17</sup> By 2010, this number had risen to roughly 88 percent.<sup>18</sup>

### 2. Was the government perceived as legitimate by 85 percent of the population?

**Yes.** Even in Indonesia's early post-independence days, its leader, Sukarno, was widely seen as legitimate, in Weberian terms, if not always popular. The first federal government was formed with the approval of local leaders from different areas of the country, lending credibility and local buy-in to a central government.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the election in the mid-1950s saw more than a 90 percent voter turnout, strongly indicating broad popular acceptance of democracy as a source of legitimacy of governance.<sup>20</sup> Indonesia's insurgencies in the 1960s were entirely local in nature, never affecting more than 15 percent of the total population and never gaining popular support outside their local area.<sup>21</sup> An analysis of the 1961 Indonesian census (*Sensus Penduduk*) confirms this idea.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, three of the four insurgent groups in this period initially *accepted* the central government and sought peaceful reforms before turning to violence, another indication that most Indonesians regarded the government as legitimate. Suharto maintained and strengthened the legitimacy of the central government for more than 30 years with public education programs in primary schools and a track record of impressive economic growth.<sup>23</sup> Economic turmoil in the late 1990s resulted in a brief period of national dissatisfaction with the government, but the government regained legitimacy through its new policies under *reformasi*.<sup>24</sup> The end of Suharto's New Order in 1998 brought about major democratic reforms and a new constitutional order. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, Indonesia was a stable modern democracy.<sup>25</sup> There is a low-level insurgency in the Papua province of Indonesia today, but it affects less than 2 percent of the population.

**3. Did the government maintain or achieve security control over roughly 85 percent of the country’s overall population?**

**Yes.** The population of Indonesia at this time was approximately 134 million. The population of Aceh was 2.26 million, and the Aceh insurgency was completely contained there. In 1976, the government was able to provide security for other parts of the country.<sup>26</sup> GAM took control of 70–80 percent of the Aceh province in the late 1990s, but this territory encompassed less than 2 percent of the overall population of Indonesia.<sup>27</sup>

**4. Did the rebel movement have persistent access to external sanctuary in a neighboring country to a militarily significant degree?**

**No.** There was no external sanctuary across a land border. For example, Malaysia deported GAM members and turned them over to the Indonesian government.<sup>28</sup> Libya, though limited in scope, trained GAM II and III members and provided them shelter, but access to Libya was naturally limited to the relatively small numbers of GAM personnel.<sup>29</sup>

**5. Was there a government army or armed constabulary force in existence at the start of the conflict?**

**Yes.** The Indonesian government had a standing army, which it deployed to Aceh until 2005, when the two sides signed a peace agreement.<sup>30</sup>

## Outcome

Government victory. The government remained in power, and Aceh remained a part of Indonesia. The government successfully brought the GAM insurgents to the negotiating table in 2005 and signed a peace agreement. Under that agreement, 70 percent of the income from the natural resources of Aceh would remain in Aceh, GAM would disarm and dissolve, and all former GAM fighters would be granted amnesty. This case supports the Five Factors theory.

<b>INDONESIA (ACEH 1976–2005)</b>	
<b>NATIONAL IDENTITY</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>GOVERNMENT LEGITIMACY</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>POPULATION SECURITY</b>	<b>YES</b>
<b>EXTERNAL SANCTUARY</b>	<b>NO</b>
<b>EXISTING SECURITY FORCES</b>	<b>YES</b>

## Endnotes

1. “Indonesia,” in *The World Factbook*, CIA, continuously updated, last updated October 29, 2024.
2. Priyambudi Sulistiyanto, “Whither Aceh?,” *Third World Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (2001): 437–52, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3993473>.
3. Sulistiyanto, “Whither Aceh?”
4. Sulistiyanto, “Whither Aceh?”
5. Christopher Paul et al., “Indonesia (Aceh), 1976–2005: Case Outcome: COIN Win (Mixed, Favoring COIN),” in *Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies* (RAND Corporation, 2013), 403–14, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt5hhsjk.47>.
6. Paul et al., “COIN Win.”
7. Paul et al., “COIN Win.”
8. Michael L. Ross, “Resources and Rebellion in Aceh, Indonesia,” in *Understanding Civil War: Evidence and Analysis*, vol. 2, *Europe, Central Asia, and Other Regions*, ed. Paul Collier and Nicholas Sambanis (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, 2005), 36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02484.6>.
9. Ross, “Resources and Rebellion.”
10. Paul et al., “COIN Win.”
11. Shigeru Sato, *War, Nationalism and Peasants: Java Under the Japanese Occupation, 1942–45* (Routledge, 1994), 36–61.
12. Jennifer Lindsay and Maya H. T. Liem, eds., *Heirs to World Culture: Being Indonesian, 1950–1965* (Brill, 2012), 1–2.
13. Ralf Emmers, “Democratization, National Identity and Indonesia’s Foreign Policy,” special forum, *The Asian Forum*, June 25, 2019, <https://theasianforum.org/democratization-national-identity-and-indonesias-foreign-policy/>.
14. Henk Schulte Nordholt, “Indonesia in the 1950s: Nation, Modernity, and the Post-Colonial State,” *Bijdragen Tot De Taal-, Land- En Volkenkunde / Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 167, no. 4 (2011): 386–404, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22134379-90003577>.
15. Nordholt, “Indonesia in 1950s.”
16. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Suharto, President of Indonesia,” last updated October 18, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Suharto>.
17. Demographic Institute of the Faculty of Economics, University of Indonesia at Jakarta, *1974 World Population Year: The Population of Indonesia* (Committee for International Cooperation in National Research in Demography, 1973), 31–32.
18. “Muslim Population of Indonesia,” Pew Research Center, November 4, 2010, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2010/11/04/muslim-population-of-indonesia/>.
19. Nordholt, “Indonesia in 1950s.”
20. Nordholt, “Indonesia in 1950s.”
21. “Sensus Penduduk 1961 Republik Indonesia,” *Badan Pusat Statistik*, accessed November 25, 2023.
22. “Sensus Penduduk.”
23. Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, *Indonesia: A Country Study*, 6th ed., ed. William H. Frederick and Robert L. Worden (US Government Printing Office, 2011).
24. See Michael Carson and John Clark, “Asian Financial Crisis: July 1997–December 1998,” Federal Reserve History, November 22, 2013, <https://www.federalreservehistory.org/essays/asian-financial-crisis>; and Lesley McCulloch, *Aceh: Then and Now* (Minority Rights Group International, 2005).
25. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. “Indonesia – Government and Society,” by Oliver W. Wolters et al., last updated November 6, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Indonesia/Government-and-society>.
26. Ross, “Resources and Rebellion,” 37; and “Population, Total – Indonesia,” The World Bank Group, n.d., accessed July 14, 2023, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2021&locations=ID&start=1960&view=chart>.
27. Kirsten E. Schulze, *The Free Aceh Movement (GAM): Anatomy of a Separatist Organization* (East-West Center Washington, 2004), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06536>.

28. Schulze, *Free Aceh*.
29. Paul et al., “COIN Win,” 403–14.
30. Ross, “Resources and Rebellion.”



<https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/Research-Commentary/Study-of-Internal-Conflict/SOIC-Conflict-Studies/>

\*\*\*\*\*  
More information about the programs of the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and US Army War College (USAWC) Press can be found on the SSI website at <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/>.

\*\*\*\*\*  
Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press publications should contact the digital media manager via e-mail at [usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@army.mil](mailto:usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.ssi-editor-for-production@army.mil). All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: “Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and US Army War College Press, US Army War College.”

