Why is peace in Aceh successful?

Hamid Awaluddin

Aceh today is a place of peace. Guns are silent. Women no longer become widows because of political violence. Children freely develop their dreams to have a brighter future because they can attend schools. The economy is running well. Social interactions are uninterrupted. The people of Aceh have already elected their own leaders through free, democratic and fair local elections. The clear line between ‘we’ and ‘they’ has already been deleted – we have only one clear line, ‘we’. These realities were empty dreams during the three decades of bloody conflict. They became possible in August 2005 in Helsinki with the peace accord signed by the Government of Indonesia and the leaders of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). In short, past differences had already been overcome to achieve a suitable future dispensation.

The government’s offers

There are several reasons why peace in Aceh has been achievable. First, the government entered the peace negotiations with clear action plans and reasonable offers. It started with the offer of amnesty to GAM, allowing all their prisoners and detainees to be released two weeks after the signing of the peace accord. All the legal charges against the GAM’s activists would be dropped and those who lived overseas could return home unconditionally. The government held about 2700 prisoners and detainees. They are now free.

Along with this, the government offered concrete economic programmes. The Acehnese government was to be allowed to keep 70 per cent of Aceh’s revenues. These revenues can undoubtedly propel the economy forward, which was ruined during the war. Such a high percentage of revenues was an unimaginable hope during the war. In short, the unfairness of the previous share of revenues led to three decades of bloody conflict. This is now over. Aceh is developing a better economy now.

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The impact of the tsunami
The tsunami that devastated Aceh and caused the loss of almost 200,000 human lives became another factor that led to a successful outcome. The tsunami created common ground which allowed the Indonesian government and GAM to start peace negotiations. Both sides felt pity for all those who were suffering. Both sides realized that helping the victims of the tsunami was much more important than continuing the conflict. Besides, the international community was in Aceh for humanitarian purposes, so both sides were reluctant to keep fighting. Sadness seemed to bury the will to fight.

High-level commitment
A further reason for success is the full commitment of the government to settle this bloody conflict through non-violent means. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono convinced the military to support the peace talks. Vice-President M. Jusuf Kalla made the moves, from outlining the plan of the talks to lobbying the parliament. They both worked in tandem to stop the war. They both believed that peace is the best vehicle for addressing the past differences. As a businessman, the Vice-President made calculations in terms of the costs and benefits of continuing the war.

The next factor is the support of armed forces. In the beginning, pessimism overshadowed the peace talks. People believed that the armed forces would be an obstacle to peace, because they would lose the economic benefits they had derived from the war. This is wrong. I received full support from the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, General Endiarto. “Enough of the war. The armed forces also lost their men in the battle. No general would sacrifice his men,” Endiarto said.

International support
International support was also key to our success. Vice-President Kalla invited the Ambassadors of the USA, United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Japan, Australia, and Singapore and asked them to support the plan. “Please ask your government to approach and put pressure on the leaders of GAM who live in Sweden to enter the peace negotiations,” Kalla said to those Ambassadors. “You are all in Aceh now for humanitarian reasons, helping the Acehnese after the tsunami, but you cannot be effective in your mission if the guns still smoke and food supplies are intercepted. You cannot build roads and bridges if there is no guarantee that you are not going to be kidnapped. The achievement of your mission here depends greatly on your support to enter peace negotiations and establish peace in Aceh,” continued Kalla. This tactic worked very well.
The leadership of the mediator, Martti Ahtisaari, was unmistakably decisive. He never allowed either side to discuss issues other than those he provided on the agendas and itinerary. “The only agenda and vehicle we have is special autonomy, nothing else,” he said. Ahtisaari was also easily able to find appropriate words to avoid the sensitivities of both sides. He had the courage to say to both sides: “Do not waste my time if you just come to my place to curse each other. You come here for a solution, not for condemnation.” In addition, Ahtisaari said, “If you keep talking about the idea of independence, please leave my room and never come back. But remember, you will never get what you dream. Not in my lifetime. I will use all of my muscles to influence Europe and the world not to support you. You will never get independence.”

The design of the negotiations

Agreement on a ‘zip mouth policy’ during the seven months of negotiations contributed significantly to the establishment of peace. Neither the government nor GAM was allowed to leak information to the media on the substantive issues being discussed. Both sides obediently observed this policy, so the peace talks continued without being interrupted much by unnecessary controversial issues in the media. This policy prevented the media from developing and provoking unhelpful debate.

Along with this, the format of the peace process – direct and informal talks – played an important role. Direct talks meant both sides could see each other and talk directly, heart to heart. Both sides could see into each other’s eyes. Messages were not delivered by the third party, but conveyed to each other directly. Therefore both parties did not come with interpretations, but conclusions.

Another key to the process’s success has been the loyalty of GAM’s followers in obeying the commands of their leaders who conducted the peace talk. Not a single casualty occurred during the peace talks. This was a huge help in allowing the talks to continue and reach agreement.

Finally, the willingness and ability of both sides to maintain personal relations was crucial. No single difficult issue was left unsolved. Deep personal relations and ongoing conversations enabled us to find solutions to unresolved issues from the negotiation table.