

BOOK REVIEW

Merawat Ingatan: Biografi Perintis Jalan Damai Aceh (Keeping Memory Alive: Short Biographies of Aceh Peace Negotiators) Volume 1

**Saiful Mahdi, Reza Idria and Muhammad Riza Nurdin (eds.),
Banda Aceh: Bandar Publishing, 2020***

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The richness of the content of this excellent book unveils so much information about the key persons behind the peace process in Aceh that its educational value is clear. Aceh is always an interesting and complex topic for discussion. It is a province located in the westernmost part of Indonesia, a region with astonishing legacies, from its history to politics, where the conflict between the Indonesian Government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) has resulted in prolonged tension over many decades, especially among the Acehnese.

This book offers a variety of interesting narratives about the Acehnese struggle to end the prolonged conflict in the province. The conflict is a complicated and deep-rooted issue, and during the New Order era between 1968 and 1998, there was a great deal of tension between the local activists represented by GAM and the Indonesian Central Government under Suharto's regime. This prolonged conflict occurred as a result of both groups having different perspectives on particular issues such as the implementation of Sharia law and the distribution of natural resources between the local and central governments. Under Suharto, the Indonesian Government believed that GAM was an insurgency movement that aimed to separate Aceh from Indonesia. Conversely, GAM felt that the Suharto regime was too oppressive after its decision to establish a military operational zone in the province.

This informative book is essential, especially for students of history and international relations, as it reveals the key figures behind efforts to end the prolonged conflict in Aceh. As far as I am concerned, only a few authors have endeavored to write on this particular topic, but this book resembles a memoir with personal notes. As readers, we tend to look at the peace process from the perspective of the result rather than the prolonged and complicated process itself, but peace negotiation is "a time-consuming" process, from finding an impartial peace negotiator to choosing one particular person to represent each group.

* 291 pages, <https://isbn.perpusnas.go.id/Account/SearchBuku?searchTxt=978-623-7936-35-0&searchCat=ISBN>

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This book comprises eleven chapters, including one chapter as the prologue and three chapters as the epilogue, together with seven chapters dedicated to explaining the “local heroes” that positively contributed to the peace process in Aceh. As it was a long, hard negotiation, many officials have contributed significantly to realizing this peace process. In addition to the personnel that we have already discussed above, the former Indonesian Vice President, Muhammad Jusuf Kalla, is the most high-profile official behind this successful resolution.

Essentially, this book begins at Chapter 2, with Rosni Idham becoming the central point for discussion, a woman using her role as an artist to support the peace process in Aceh through her poetry, while Chapter 3 discusses the role of Yusny Saby, a leading Acehnese academic, who mediated between the Indonesian Government and GAM. However, if the previous chapter tells the story about the role of local academics and artists, Chapter 4, in particular, recounts the role of Imam Syuja’, a religious leader, in supporting the peace negotiation. Meanwhile, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 discuss the story of Nasruddin Bin Ahmad, Muhammad Nur Djuli and Teuku Kamaruzzaman, respectively, conveying stories from GAM personnel, revealing their roles as GAM negotiators. Finally, Chapter 8 explains Zaini Abdullah’s political role as one of the foremost GAM leaders, who later became the Governor of Aceh between 2012 and 2017.

The Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding details a complicated process. However, Aspinall (2005, pp. 1-2) has argued that “The MoU sets down the outline of a permanent settlement and includes provisions on the government of Aceh, human rights protection, security matters, imaginative methods for reintegrating former GAM combatants into society, and a robust third-party mechanism for monitoring implementation.” The ability of the two sides to identify their common interests was key to this agreement. This argument is also supported by Kingsbury (2010, p. 154): “Whatever the perspective, this MoU is the best that could possibly have been achieved by the GAM team given the circumstances.” As the result of the agreement can accommodate both parties’ interests, the Helsinki MoU has successfully facilitated a peace process. Today, Aceh is becoming a special territory within Indonesia, implementing sharia law and obtaining a greater share of the natural resources and finances from central government. Finally, this book provides all the required information related to what occurred during the conflict period and who the key people were behind the successful peace negotiation process as the Helsinki Agreement is certainly one of the most important historical legacies for both Indonesia and Aceh.

References

- Aspinall, E. 2005. The Helsinki Agreement: A More Promising Basis for Peace in Aceh? *Policy Studies* 20.
- Kingsbury, D. 2010. 8. The Aceh Peace Process. In A. Graf, S. Schroter, and E. P. Wieringa (eds.). *Aceh: History, Politics and Culture* (pp. 135-154), Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.