

# Islam and political secularism: their convergence in an independence struggle.

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The Free Aceh<sup>2</sup> Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, or GAM) has often been characterized as an Islamic organization. Despite clear Islamic influences, GAM is a nationalist organization the political goals of which are explicitly based on territory rather than religion<sup>3</sup>. Further, explicit in the political agenda of GAM is the ending of the imposition of Islamic law in Aceh. According to the Prime Minister of the State of Aceh, Malik Mahmud: 'GAM opposed the imposition of *Syariah* Laws in Aceh by Jakarta because GAM's struggle is motivated by and based on independence and not on religious issues. Jakarta is merely using *syariah* laws as a propaganda ploy to deviate public opinion from the real issue of the conflict.'<sup>4</sup>

On 15 August 2005, GAM signed a peace agreement to end almost 30 years of conflict intended to gain independence from Indonesia. Until the signing of the Helsinki peace, GAM had proposed that as an independent state, Aceh would be founded upon democratic principles and civil law. Indeed, the imposition of *syariah* (Islamic law

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<sup>2</sup> A note on spelling: the spelling of 'Aceh' reflects an Acehnese/Achehnese rejection of the Indonesian 'new spelling' (*ejaan baru*), which changed the name of the Dutch Atjeh to Aceh. The use of 'Aceh' therefore connotes Acehnese nationalism. This paper employs the spelling 'Aceh' because it retains some neutrality even when used by those who might otherwise support various Acehnese claims to autonomy or independence. All other spellings are either as approved spellings of Arabic words by GAM or are Acehnese spellings/language.

<sup>3</sup> With the signing of the peace agreement, GAM's claims to a separate nationalist identity formally no longer exist.

<sup>4</sup> Malik Mahmud was named as Prime Minister of the State of Aceh in the Stavanger Declaration. Correspondence from Malik Mahmud to the author, 17 October 2005.

which nominally governs all facets of living) by the Jakarta government and the establishment of *syariah* courts in Aceh was strongly opposed by GAM as not reflecting an Acehnese understanding of Islam and as functioning as a further method of oppression of Acehnese people. The prevailing view among GAM has been that Acehnese do not require that *syariah* be imposed for them to have their lives imbued with Islam. According to the leader of GAM in Malaysia, Muhammad Nur Djuli:

Major news agencies, after accurately reporting atrocious incidents perpetrated by Indonesian security forces in Aceh, quite often explain that the conflict is about Acehnese attempting to establish a fundamentalist Islamic State and that Indonesia has accorded the so-called Syariah law for Aceh in order to appease the 'rebels'. To be clear, the ASNLF<sup>5</sup> does not wish to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state, and does not accept the imposition of Syariah law. If Islamic law is to be accepted by the Acehnese people, it must be of a type decided by the Acehnese people themselves in a public ballot. It cannot be imposed from outside. (Djuli 2005:2)

This paper will explore how these devout Muslims promote an Islamic influenced but not an Islamic determined political agenda, while still acknowledging Islam as basic to their political struggle. The distinction between an Islamic influenced and an Islamic determined state is understood in this context to refer to the difference between a state that is imbued with Islamic values (an influenced state) and a state that is predicated upon *syariah* as such (a determined state). The key characteristic is that in an Islamic influenced state, the moral basis of social codes of behavior derives from Islam, but as social codes they find expression in civil law rather than religious law. This may allow for the imposition of civil law based on Islamic tenets (e.g.

gambling) but which is not adjudicated through Islamic courts or which imposes 'Islamic' punishments.

Islam established itself quite early in the history of the region. Islam first entered the Indonesian archipelago, along with Arabic and Indian traders, through Aceh sometime after 700 AD. The first Islamic kingdom, Perlak, was established within the region of Aceh in the year 804, and over the next 600 years the kingdoms of the region, including Samudra<sup>6</sup> (later Pasai) and Pidie, combined with Aceh Besar to form Aceh. 'The history of Atjeh (sic.) is told largely in terms of Islam and trade' (Siegel 1969:4).

Like most of South-East Asia, Islam in Aceh is predominantly Sunni (*Sunnah wal Jamaah*) and like most Muslims in the region, Acehnese are disciples of the Syafii doctrine, although also recognizing the four major schools of Sunni: Syafii, Hanafi, Hanbali and Maliki. Imam Syafii is believed by many Acehnese to have been the most careful if liberal of the four great Imams of Islam, although he was known to err towards being conservative when faced with an unclear dilemma. The Syafii branch also has two (or arguably three) sub-branches. There are quite a few differences between the Acehnese and Malaysian interpretations of the Syafii doctrine, for example in the matter of divorce. About 10 per cent of Acehnese also follow the Shi'ite path of Islam, although there is little if any reported conflict over this division. Contrary to some belief, although Acehnese Muslims are generally tolerant, the more mystical Sufiist version of Islam has had only passing popularity. The militant Wahhabist (much less Qtbist) version of Islam has been even less popular in Aceh,

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<sup>5</sup> The Aceh-Sumatra National Liberation Front (ASNLF) is the formal name of GAM.

<sup>6</sup> After which the island of Sumatra is named.

running counter as it does to the general Acehese sense of tolerance and a common pre-occupation with material affairs.

Aceh's Islamic origins stem from its geographic location as the first port of call for Islamic traders to the region. As Islam's starting point in the archipelago, and the last point of departure for the hajj, Aceh was named by Arab traders as Mecca's Verandah (*Serambi Mekkah*). It was from Aceh that Islam spread to the rest of the archipelago, dating from around the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The history of Acehese struggle against external aggression has also been characterized by themselves as *jihad*, or holy struggle, which implies a particularly Islamic understanding of the notion of such struggle. This Islamic political identity was enhanced by Aceh's participation in the Dar'ul Islam Rebellion of the 1950s<sup>7</sup> and by GAM's subsequent claims to being descended from the Dar'ul Islam rebellion lineage. That virtually all GAM members are devout Sunni Muslims further leads observers to believe that it is an Islamic organization.

In Acehese political tradition, the state is construed as the guardian of the rights of its citizens, including the right to practice their religion without hindrance. This reflects one of the traditional roles of the head of state, being either the sultan or the *Wali Nangroe* ('state guardian'). Historically, the main function of the sultan was to ensure that Islam and *syariah* were able to be practiced. '... the sultan was the protector of the law, and the state existed so that the law could be administered. ... "Kings become the lieutenants of God on earth ..."<sup>8</sup>.' (Siegel 1969:39) This model

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<sup>7</sup> Aceh joined the Dar'ul Islam Rebellion in 1953 as part of the Negera Islam Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic State), finally ending its involvement in 1963.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from the *Adat Atjeh* (19<sup>th</sup> century book of Acehese customary law, based on earlier accounts of such law).

states that *syariah* is indeed practiced, but the important element of it is that the king is identified primarily with protecting the *syariah*, not imposing it.

GAM's view of politics is further influenced by traditional Acehnese models which contain elements of both a proto-democracy and a 'complex balance of power' (Nazaruddin1985:17). This 'complex balance of power' usually refers to the mediating influences of the sultan, the lords (*uleebelang*) and the clergy (*ulama*) (see Siegel :29-67, also Kell 1995:6, Marsden 1966 (1811):,403-5, Loeb 1974 (1935): 211-2). These practices have existed since the reign of Sultan Iskandar Muda (1609-1636). Power-sharing at this level was traditionally (and remains) expressed through what is referred to by GAM, according to Malik Mahmud, as the 'state code': '*Adat bak Po Teumeureuhom, Hukom bak Syah Kuala, Kanun bak Putroe Phang, Reusam bak Bentara*' ('Power rests with the king, Law with the great imam of Syah Kuala, Tradition with the Princess of Pahang<sup>9</sup> and Regulations with the Bentara<sup>10</sup>.') Malik Mahmud confirmed that the references applied primarily to the first two elements of the 'state code', and was frequently used by GAM members in their official letters in Acehnese. Deleting the role of the Princess of Pahang, which refers to cultural matters, this traditional political system reflected a triumvirate in which no individual (or single group) dominated the political process. In a more developed sense, these three positions have been characterized by some Acehnese as comprising a form of *trias politica*, or the combination of the three key areas of state administration divided by the separation of powers into discreet areas of responsibility, thus ensuring a political

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<sup>9</sup> The Acehnese Sultan Iskandar Muda, who was at war with the Portuguese colonial establishment in Malacca, heard that Pahang, another Malay Sultanate on the East Coast of the Peninsula, was about to make an alliance with the Portuguese. He invaded the sultanate; but instead of destroying it, he married its princess and gave an Acehnese territory, Jambi in Central Sumatra, as a gift to an uncle of his new wife. Recognizing the Malay princess as very knowledgeable in traditional etiquette, the sultan gave her the power to set rules for the culture of his kingdom; her *kanun* (rulings) continue to be practiced by many Acehnese.

balance which is usually regarded as necessary in a functioning democracy<sup>11</sup>. That is, there was a balance between administrative, legal and religious influences in traditional Acehnese life, and not just the blanket application of *syariah*.

Similarly, at the local or village level, the Acehnese traditional administrative system was administered by a collective leadership under the above-noted approximation of the separation of powers. This system was replaced by a more hierarchical Javanese model under the New Order government, although was reinstated in areas liberated by GAM. At a local level, the three above-noted positions complied with a village chief (*geuchik*) as well as the *bentara* and *imam*. The *geuchik* was assisted by two councils, of four and eight elders. The *imam* interpreted law, being by definition literate in the *kitab sirat* (written guidance) and traditionally, in some cases, the only literate member of the village. The council of four elders implemented these laws and the council of eight elders considered and advises on relevant matters (see Loeb 1974:227-9). All office holders were elected, although it was common for the *geuchik* and often the *imam* to be almost hereditary, it being common to elect the eldest son to replace the father (Djuli 2005:6). Law as it was or in some cases still is locally administered would reflect the social codification of Islamic values, although may also reflect aspects of *syariah*.

According to Nur Djuli, it was GAM's intention that if Aceh achieved independence it would create a democratic society. The Stavanger Declaration, in which the ASNLF established the Government of the State of Aceh (Peumeurintah Neugara Aceh), stipulates that the system of government of the State of Aceh is to be

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<sup>10</sup> Similar to a contemporary chief of police.

based on democratic elections (ASNLF 2002). This democratic preference has also been reflected in the MoU signed between GAM and the Government of Indonesia, which is explicitly democratic in its orientation (MoU 2005:1.1 -1 1.2.8, see also GAM 13.7.2005, GAM 14.7.2005, GAM 15.7.2005). Indeed the issue of whether or not Aceh would be democratic was the most critical element of the negotiations that achieved the MoU.

However, earlier statements by GAM's founder Tengku (Lord) Muhammad Hasan di Tiro, that Aceh would become an Islamic state, with himself as sultan, have left a lasting impression. 'Aceh will be an Islamic State because the people of Aceh will want it so;' di Tiro said. 'If the world wants to see this confirmed by referendum, I have no objection to such a referendum, because I know my people will want an Islamic State'. (Hulst 1991) While this implied a certain religious determinism, it still allowed that this predicted outcome would arrive via a democratic process. It is probably also fair to say that, based on the preceding definitions and GAM's rejection of *syariah*, the term 'Islamic' in this state context refers to 'influenced' rather than 'determined'. According to Malik Mahmud: 'Throughout centuries, the state of Aceh and Islam co-existed in perfect harmony. The law of the state was based on civil law whilst deriving its moral content from Islam as well as elements of Acehnese traditions which was not contradict with Islam and this should remains so in the future.'

The question, however, was whether establishing an Islamic state was part of GAM's political agenda, and if so whether this was to be through imposition of *syariah*. According to the Qur'an, the state should be run by a strong leader chosen by his

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<sup>11</sup> The *trias politica*, or separation of powers, usually refers to the executive, the legislature and

people, working in conjunction with an elected *shura* (council). Within this system, the people retain the right to criticize their ruler. Finally, it is not necessary that the state is run according to *syariah*, but it is necessary that the state has laws that are in conformity with *syariah*. Taken as a political model, this could be equated with a republican system in which the head of state is elected and retains considerable executive powers, but who rules with the support of a council (or legislature). The right to criticize the ruler is usually understood as complying with the 'first generation' human right of freedom of speech, which is generally argued to be fundamental to democratic rule. Together, these qualities appear to comply with conventional understandings of democracy, or rule by the people supported by the safeguard of the right to speak out against poor government. The conformity of civil law with *syariah* can be understood as somewhat more restrictive, except that the main principles of *syariah* are largely not dissimilar to Judeo-Christian/secular principles. Gambling, for example, was illegal in many democratic countries for many years, and in some states still is. Similarly, drinking alcohol has been outlawed at various times in various places, and restriction on the consumption of alcohol in public places is still common in democratic states. Until recently, adultery was also considered grounds for legal proceedings, while some sexual practices continue to be illegal in some democratic states.

According to Nur Djuli, an understanding of political Islam that equates it with either the secular state or an Islamic state is 'clouded much by either the current equation of Islam with tyrannical Middle-Eastern regimes or by the old Orientalism propaganda'. (pers.com 9.9.2005) This rejection of an either/or reductionism means that it is quite possible for GAM to promote a cause based on a nationalist identity rather than as an Islamic cause, and to reject the formal imposition of *syariah*. At the

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the judiciary.



same time, GAM members can maintain their full Islamic identity and strive for a state that is imbued with Islamic principles and protects practice of the faith.

Until the early years of the new century, within GAM there was little formal thought given to what sort of state an independent Aceh would be. The prevailing view was that independence should be achieved first, then the Acehnese people could decide through a participatory process what sort of a state they wanted in a referendum. (e.g. see Harsono 2001) One common view within GAM at this time was that Aceh would become a constitutional monarchy, somewhat like Thailand, Malaysia or the UK, with Hasan di Tiro as sultan<sup>12</sup>. Hasan di Tiro is also referred to within GAM as the *Wali Nanggroe*, just *Wali* (Guardian), or Tengku (Lord). The view that he could become sultan in large part stemmed from Hasan di Tiro's claim that he is a grandson of Teungku Tjik di Tiro Muhammad Saman, who was given the mandate, as sultan, to continue the struggle against the Dutch invaders by Sultan Muhammad Daud, just before the latter's surrender and exile in 1903<sup>13</sup>. In 2002, Nur Djuli, said that if Aceh became independent it might choose to adopt Islamic law for Muslims, as in Malaysia, but this would be done through a democratic process<sup>14</sup>. 'No-one can object if this is done democratically,' he said. As noted by Nur Djuli, the ASNLF:

'...has never clearly stated the form it envisages for the eventual independent State of Aceh is exactly due to this commitment to democracy. It is for the people to decide what form of State they want to have upon independence. It is quite logical to

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<sup>12</sup> This observation is based on conversations with GAM members in Aceh in 2001 and 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Hasan di Tiro also claims that it was his uncle, Tengku Tjhik Maat di Tiro, who was the last 'head of state' of Aceh (di Tiro 1984: introduction). In 1975, Nur Djuli says di Tiro was the eighth descendant of the Teungku Tjhik di Tiro 'who was asked to rule Aceh by the Royal Council when the Sultan was killed in battle and his son was still an infant'. (Djuli 2005: 12)

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication, 15 July 2002.

expect that being almost totally Muslim, the majority of the Acehnese people would want to create an Islamic state. But what's wrong with that? If the majority of the people in a nation through a truly democratic process want to form a socialist government, or an ultra nationalist government or a Christian-Democratic government, it is still called a democratic state. ... A society that is clearly by tradition democratic, that has known its own brand of separation of powers for centuries, cannot simply turn tyrannical, Islamic or otherwise.' (Djuli 2005:8)

Along with being devout Muslims, most Acehnese also consider themselves to be tolerant, both of outsiders and of non-Muslims. This tolerance derives from Aceh pre-Islamic history as a Hindu territory and some of its domestic traditions, such as matrifocalism, notably in home ownership. But most importantly, as an important trading point at the cross-roads of the old world, Aceh was subject to great external influence and a wide range of cultures and beliefs.

Being traders, Acehnese are very open to new ideas and to a diversity of cultures. The fact that Aceh is located at one of the most strategic trading crossroads of the world naturally adds to this openness. ... Acehnese are a trading society, a society while anchored in agriculture with a very rich and fertile land; it is also one that is very outward looking, a society of sailors and explorers. They brought back new ideas that encourage the formation of thinkers. (Djuli 2005:4-5)

Even though Acehnese tend to cohere around a core cultural identity, this tolerance implies an acceptance of cultural plurality. In so far as this pluralism includes non-Muslims, they tend to be understood by Acehnese in ways that can be assessed against a pre-existing value system. Therefore, a person who is not necessarily Muslim will be judged according to his or her intentions and actions. If these accord with an Acehnese understanding of, for example, notions of good and bad, or dignity and propriety, the person will be understood and accepted (or rejected) in those terms. This implicit acceptance of pluralism further enhances an underlying tendency towards democratic principles. In that core notions of 'good' and 'bad' are generally clearly defined (as they are in most cultures, and often in not dissimilar ways), there is considerable openness to and potential for acceptance of differences of outlook. This allows for a competition of ideas, and acceptance of the idea of a 'loyal opposition'. The issue of the 'imposition' of Islam, for example by the central government, then, is problematic not because it is Islam, but because it is imposed and because it allows no variation within it, tolerance of difference, or acceptance of a pre-existing plurality. .

In part, too, the distance that has grown between GAM and any formal political commitment to Islam has developed in response to the co-opting of much of Aceh's traditional elite, including its ulamas, by the New Order government. After having led the Dar'ul Islam rebellion of the 1950s, Aceh's ulamas were increasingly viewed by GAM as being co-opted by the corporatist state, and ending up as tools for state agendas. In Aceh, this was understood that exploiting Aceh for the benefit of Jakarta. Notably, the pan-Indonesian Majelis Ulama Indonesia (Indonesian Ulama Council - MUI) was seen to have been co-opted by the New Order government, and used by a tool for the government to subjugate any sense of Acehnese separateness. Further, Aceh's own Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama (Ulamas Consultative Assembly - MPU), which comprised 27 leading Acehnese ulamas, was chaired by Dr Muslim

Ibrahim, who was also chair of MUI Aceh. Dr Ibrahim was educated in Cairo, a leading international center of Islamic scholarship, but one which promotes an orthodoxy that is often out of keeping with Acehnese Islamic practices.

Similarly, a leading activist ulama, Imam Sujak, was a member of the UCA while also being chairman of the Aceh branch of the modernist religious organization Muhammadiyah, as well as a member of the DPR for the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional – PAN). Members of PAN in Jakarta were, in 2005, outspoken in their assertion that Aceh should be maintained as a province of the unitary state of Indonesia under existing legislative requirements, which was directly counter to Acehnese claims to either independence or, in 2005, self-government (genuine autonomy). That is, Imam Sujak's political focus lay primarily with organizations that promoted a national structure (and indeed nationalism), while also being represented in an Acehnese organization. It was these types of broader pan-Indonesian political identity that alienated GAM from many formal Islamic organizations, even though GAM did receive support from some more assertively pro-Aceh ulamas.

In this, Islam could be seen not just as a means of subverting a separate Acehnese identity, but also creating a sense of extramural Islamic identity that subsumed Aceh within it. While Indonesia is not an Islamic state, its 1945 Constitution does require all citizens to profess a belief in one god, which derives from a compromise with Muslims who wanted to have Islam made Indonesia's state religion<sup>15</sup>. In this sense, religion is a unifying characteristic of Indonesia, and Islam tends to promote greater social unity rather than greater social division. That is, many Muslims

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<sup>15</sup> This was the so-called 'Jakarta Charter', which was proposed by Islamic parties to require all Muslims to live by *syariah*.

believe that the *ummat* (Islamic community) derives greater cohesion and strength from ignoring or overcoming divisive tendencies. In its more extreme development, promotes the unification of Islamic South-East Asia as a caliphate (ICG 2003: 11).

The use of Islam as tool of imposed political cohesion was most pronounced in the imposition of *syariah* by the central government. This move was intended as a means of buying off Acehnese unhappiness with Jakarta's heavy-handed rule. However, based on the perspectives of often external or externally influenced ulama (such as Muslim Ibrahim), the decision was taken that Acehnese Islam was out of keeping with more orthodox interpretations and would thus benefit from a reformulation derived from the Middle-East, in particular one of the centers of Islamic learning, Cairo. The character of the Islam that was imposed under *syariah*, then, was not only imposed, but alien, and thus alienating. In particular it was the imposition of this alien and quite strict form of Islam that angered many Acehnese, who viewed it as intolerant and therefore as un-Acehnese, and as another means of Jakarta asserting its political will over Aceh.

An illustration of a particularly Acehnese practice of Islam concerns how many *raka'at* (sessions) one should do in the *taraweh* prayer during the evenings of Ramadhan (the holy month of fasting). Many Muslims in Aceh believe that prayer is a *sunnah* ('meritorious') duty, but not *wajib* ('obligatory'). As a consequence, there is considerable freedom in Aceh about how many *taraweh* prayers may be offered, while in other parts of Islamic South-East Asia this is often more strictly defined. While there is some flexibility around the matter of *taraweh* prayers, many Acehnese are concerned not to commit *bid'ah* ('innovation'), or undertake religious deeds not clearly prescribed by the *sunnah rasulullah* (prophet's example). The principle is that it is wrong to either add or subtract from the holy teachings. This even applies to dress,

with some Acehnese disapproving of men praying in overflowing dress, because that is not how Muhammad performed prayers and it is thus regarded as showing off and thus detracting from the act. (Djuli 2005:7)

‘Good and bad and what to do about it’<sup>16</sup>

Bakhtiar Abdullah is GAM’s information officer and the spokesman for its political wing, which makes him the most public face of GAM. While Bakhtiar is known as one of the ‘political GAM’, his history with the organisation began in 1979 and was with the first intake of GAM recruits to Libya in 1986 to undertake military training. One of Bakhtiar class-mates was Muzakkir Manaf, who was from 2002 until its disbandment in 2005 the commander in chief of the GAM’s military forces, Angkatan GAM (AGAM). Bakhtiar was a platoon leader from 1986 to 1987 and was an AGAM trainer in Libya from 1987 until 1990. Towards the end of 1991, Bakhtiar was asked by the GAM leadership to join them in Stockholm. ‘Hasan di Tiro was my mentor.’ By this stage, Libya was closing down its military training camps for external organizations, following increased international pressure. GAM, similarly, had decided to distance itself from Libya over concern for being labelled as a terrorist organization.

It is clear that Bakhtiar joined GAM to be a part of the struggle for Acehnese independence, and was directly influenced by GAM’s founder, Hasan di Tiro. He also followed in a family tradition, as many in GAM have done. ‘My father was a strong supporter of GAM. He was a former commando as well, and wanted to be sent with Mr Malik [when Malik commanded AGAM in Aceh].’ There was a unity for Bakhtiar between his commitment to GAM and his commitment to Islam. ‘I was brought up in a

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with the author, near Kuala Lumpur, 11 August 2005.

family that has a very religious background,' he said. 'I don't have that much religious knowledge, but I have a strong belief in practicing Islam.'

'Filial piety has the utmost importance, and to follow the teachings of Islam. You must pray five times a day, which you must not miss for any reason what so ever. I try to follow the exact teachings. You do the best you can.' Bakhtiar, however, is unimpressed with external forms of Islam: 'I don't wear the hajj cap or carry the beads. You have to be able to read the Qu'ran, you have to say your prayers. But I was in a mixed school, so of course you have love affairs.' Bakhtiar echoed a sentiment that sets apart many Acehnese Muslims from more orthodox or Middle-eastern inspired followers. 'From our point of view, Islam is a way of life. Acehnese are true Muslims according to what we believe, but not what is portrayed in Arab countries.'

For Bakhtiar there was a point at which Islam and political struggle intersected. Islam 'is a fist religion, a religion of the fist, a religion of the sword,' he said. 'In Aceh we would die for Islam. But that doesn't mean we are militant [about Islam].' On the question of whether Islam informs his views on political struggle, Bakhtiar did not see a separation between the two. 'We believe that in continuing this struggle, in the Qu'ran there a part that says those who continue the struggle will obtain *shahid*, will become witness.' *Shahid* literally translates as 'witness', but is also commonly used as the translation for 'martyr' ('martyr' being the original term for 'witness', but having developed a somewhat separate meaning, which more accurately in this context is understood as someone who chooses to die rather than renounce religious principles, or who undergoes suffering to further a belief, cause or principle. This struggle for a principle is *jihad* (which is widely understood as 'holy war', although 'principled struggle' is perhaps a more useful translation). 'Even in Islam you have to fight for your rights,' Bakhtiar noted. 'That is what a Muslim has to do.'

'But', he said 'that doesn't mean you would establish an Islamic state with Islamic laws. Religious law is under the ulamas, who are highly respected. *Syariah* is separate to civil law. It [*syariah*] is the law of deeds [of personal behavior]. It doesn't mean you have to whip people in public' he said in reference to the implementation in Aceh of public whipping for adultery, gambling and a range of other 'sins'. 'That's not the real *syariah* law,' he said. Malik Mahmud agreed with Bakhtiar on this point: '*Syariah* Law is applicable both as a personal set of laws as well as a universal set of law - whichever one feels comfortable with.

'According to Islamic law you have to try to do the good and stop the bad,' Bakhtiar said. 'To a person who holds close to religion, you are tempted, but you hold to your faith. You will not be tempted to do the bad. You should try your utmost to fast in Ramadhan, but if you can't that is okay. You should try to follow the five pillars of Islam. Most important is prayers, to make sure the prayers are being done. Prayers are a shield against all vices or any temptation that would disrupt your faith, [and for] deciding what is good and bad and what you do about it. How you should behave in these situations. It really determines which is good and which is bad.'

It is deciding 'what is good and bad and what you do about it' that characterizes most members of GAM met by the author. In this, Islamic principles clearly influence personal judgment, and acting on that judgment – 'what you do about it' – also derives from Islam. This is understood as striving for justice, a personal *jihad*, even if it is shared with others. In taking on this *jihad* for oneself, it does not therefore imply that struggle or the principles that underpin it can or should be imposed on others. It '... does not imply a person who has committed a sin should be stoned to



death, or a thief to chop off his hands. We are human beings. We make mistakes, sometimes even against your faith. You redeem your sins and try to change.'

For Bakhtiar, the distinction between 'good and bad and what to do about it' is also driven by his personal responses, which in turn tie in with his understanding of Islam being 'a religion of the fist, a religion of the sword'.

'And there is our national identity, and our great sacrifice against the colonial powers. It is really frustrating when you are only taught two pages of your own history in history books. The Indonesians have managed to really make us some kind of other person. [They have tried] to change our national identity. And with all these atrocities, it makes you even more determined. It is against Islam, all these killings and raping. It is against all religions for that matter.'

Teungku Hanadeuh<sup>17</sup> is a name (of several) used by a senior member of the GAM intelligence organization. Like many members of GAM, he has been jailed for his activities, and it was in jail that he says he was a more devout practicing Muslim. 'A strong belief?' he asked rhetorically about his faith in Islam. 'Yes, of course. There was a time when I prayed continuously. That's when I was in jail.'

In a matter of fact way, Hanadeuh explained that he prayed in jail 'Because I have time, to be introspective. There's plenty of time to do that. Not much temptation. When you are outside you are in the marketplace and you don't have much time to go home, or in the office where there is no prayer house, or postponing, five more minutes, five more minutes, and then the time for prayer is over.'

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<sup>17</sup> The interview between the author and Teungku Hanadeuh was undertaken in Helsinki on 14 August 2005.

Hanadeuh later qualified his assessment of himself as a Muslim: 'I am not a really pious Muslim, but I am good Muslim. That is, I have the understanding of the belief. I read and I study.' But, he acknowledged, sometimes 'I didn't just follow.' Like many Acehnese, while he believed himself to be a good Muslim, it was the guiding principles of Islam that informed his political beliefs. When asked what principles those were, he replied: 'Equality, for one. There should be no superior or inferior race in the world'<sup>18</sup>. The Javanese have been claiming in Aceh they are superior, first class.'

Along with equality, Hanadeuh was opposed to theft, both of material possessions and of what he viewed as his political independence. 'There should be no stealing of someone else's possessions, let alone to steal someone else sovereignty or country.' This in turn led to the question of justice, and the ways that religion can function as a mechanism for social purposes. 'Everyone needs justice. Being in prison, I learned more about justice and what justice the Indonesian government has offered to the Acehnese people. Justice is not limited to one or two religions, it is universal. Religion only provides a means and way to participate in justice.'

Echoing Bakhtiar's observations on Islam being a 'religion of the fist, a religion of the sword', Hanadeuh stated that within Islam, 'Fighting is acceptable because you must defend your rights against anyone.' In this, there was no divisibility between the right to practice one's religion and the right to determine one's other social or political affairs. Further, noting a sense of mutual responsibility between Muslims, Hanadeuh was critical of states comprised of Islamic peoples who attacked or tried to control

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<sup>18</sup> Equality complies with the Prophet Muhammad's last sermon in which he said: 'All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over a black nor a black has any

their neighbors. 'Indonesia has claimed themselves as Muslim,' he said, 'but Muslims should not steal other Muslim's possessions. That is why Iraq had to leave Kuwait, and Turkey had to give up the Arabian peninsula.'

Also reflecting Bakhtiar's comments on *shahid*, Hanadeuh stated that: 'If you get killed when you defend your possessions, your land, you are a martyr, after you fulfill all your duties.' But he qualified the acceptability of fighting, noting that it had to be for a good cause. 'If your intention is to go to war to expect a good position for yourself, then you are not a martyr. Being a martyr is sacrificing yourself for the bigger cause.' Similarly, according to Nur Djuli, the link between Islam, notions of justice and GAM's struggle is that, 'put simply, GAM soldiers want to go to heaven when they are killed in battle. But it is not that they want to go to heaven and thus join GAM as a ladder. Being Muslim, GAM soldiers believe that it is the demand of their religion to fight for their right, to right the wrong, to regain their national honor. They do not fight for freedom in order to be good Muslims, but because they are good Muslims. Consequently, in practical terms, GAM does not fight for Islam, but because they are Muslims. Islam forbids acceptance of injustice.'(9.9.2005)

If Hanadeuh understood his political views as being influenced by but in some sense separate from Islam, Shadia Marhaban took that idea one step further. 'There is no relation between religion and politics,' she said. 'Good politics is a result of hard work and commitment.' But, she said, the hard work and commitment was guided by belief. 'I believe there is a power on top of what we're doing. I believe someone is seeing from up high.'<sup>19</sup>

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superiority over a white – except by piety and good action.'  
(<http://www.submission.org.sermon.html>, accessed 8.9.2005)

Marhaban was a translator in Aceh during the Cessation of Hostilities (CoHA) period from 9 December 2002 until 18 May 2003 and was part of the GAM team to the Aceh peace talks in Helsinki in 2005. Since the collapse of the CoHA in 2003, she has lived in the United States. On Islam, 'I fast, I pray ... sometimes,' she said. 'I consider myself as a good Muslim. I have a good understanding of Islam. But I am not pious, not an imam or whatever.'

Having lived in the US and traveled widely, Marhaban has had wider experience than many others, and believes this has influenced part of her outlook. 'From my background and knowledge from being an international traveler, I have had more opportunity to see how the world lives, how people live, how people suffer, how they should live in a better place.' It is this, she said, that has spurred her social conscience, which informs her work on Aceh.

Marhaban joined the Helsinki peace process as the only woman attached to either of the two negotiating teams, and the Indonesian delegation informally objected to her participating in the negotiating process on the grounds that she is a woman. The political position of women is an issue that Marhaban was one that she believed was important. 'The role of women? Well, that is something I need to fight for,' she said. 'I think the [Islamic] culture more brings the women in to a situation where they live in a patriarchal society, where women are repressed, have a lack of rights to speak, to do what they want to do. It is men together, it is in the Qu'ran also, but it doesn't say specifically that we have to do this, we have to do that.'

The Acehnese society is traditionally matrifocal but this has been tempered by Islamic tenets. Women have an important and respected place in Acehnese society.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with the author, Helsinki, 13 August 2005.

According to Siapno: 'While Islamic teachings emphasize the dominant role of the man as head-of-household, performing an important role as husband and father, in the Acehese matrifocal system, the men are relegated to a very marginal role'. (see also Siegel 1969:ch7). To that end, Acehese women traditionally retained their own names after marriage, and Acehese children were traditionally born in the house of their mother, which is usually given to her by her father (Loeb9174:220). The expression for the wife is, in fact, 'the one who owns the house' (*nyang peurumoh*). Traditionally, although property and parenting were bilateral (men and women each held approximately equal rights to ownership), men would go to live in the house and the village of their wife. Acehese also differ from other Muslims in the region in their interpretations of the Sunni Syafii doctrine, such as in the matter of divorce. In Malaysia a man can pronounce divorcing his wife three times and that concludes the matter. In the Acehese interpretation, divorce is understood to be primarily by deed and not words. Divorce initiated by women (*fasah*) is also generally easier in Aceh than elsewhere.

In studying the reigns of Aceh's four queens, Siapno observed that '... it is taken for granted that women are well qualified to assume the highest political position in the land. In the description of the reign of one of the female rulers of State in Aceh, the same language and schematic formula used to describe great male kings is appropriated to describe female rule. It is almost as if the pull of the schema to describe the state kingship and the state of having power transcends gender'. However, Marhaban is more sanguine about the position of women: 'In Aceh it seems like there's a brick wall in front of women and they can't break through,' she said. 'So there's the women's struggle as well.'

While Marhaban is a relatively outspoken woman in an Islamic context, she is not out of keeping with many women in Aceh, who retain considerable authority over a range of affairs. Added to her worldliness and modernist influences, Marhaban is also doubtful about taking literally the teachings of the Qu'ran: 'Of course, the Qu'ran was written ages ago and the situation is different,' she said.

Noting the relatively high status of women in traditional Acehnese society and in keeping with the Prophet Muhammad's last sermon, Bakhtiar also noted that 'Women also have a very high status in Aceh, they are very respectable. I help my wife with all the chores and all of that.' Drawing on that part of the Qu'ran that upholds the position of women, Bakhtiar said: 'It is a way of life in Islam where women are respectfully treated, for their loyalty, for their status as a woman. But not in Middle-East countries. I saw even in Libya the women are far away back.' The role of women in GAM is viewed by many outsiders as mixed. But as Bakhtiar noted: 'We even send our women, Inong Balee<sup>20</sup>, to participate in important meetings. They have a very high status, if not on a par with men, But we treat them with dignity and respect.' The Inong Balee was originally formed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by a female Acehnese naval admiral, Malahayati, who is credited with defeating a Portuguese fleet in the Straits of Malacca. Malahayati founded the Inong Balee of women whose husbands and fiancés had been killed in battle. Aceh also had four queens as heads of state in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The link between the role of women and democracy revolves around notions of political equality. It is clear that as an Islamic and in many respects still traditional society, Aceh does not accord women full and equal rights with men. However, there is

recognition within GAM of the role and rights of women, and this field remains contested. This contestation, and the relative respect accorded to women by GAM members, does imply a move towards political parity, if that has not yet actually been realized.

While many Acehnese, and in particular in GAM, reject formalist Islamic teachings that derive from the Middle-East, Munawar Liza studied for seven years at the Islamic University in Cairo and speaks and writes, among other languages, fluent Arabic. Munawar ran the Aceh Information Office in Pittsburgh, USA, until moving to Stockholm to assist with GAM's political organization in August 2005. 'I try to be a good Muslim,' he said. 'To be a good Muslim is to do all the obligations Muslims have to do and also to prevent things that are forbidden, things that are *munkar* (evil).'<sup>21</sup>

According to Munawar, the key link between Islam and GAM is through the struggle for justice. 'What we do is an obligation of every Muslim, which is to bring justice to the people. And we also have an obligation to do good things, to fight against injustice.' This fight against injustice is 'an order of God in the Qu'ran and also in the Hadith'<sup>22</sup> and it is also the teachings of Islam to bring justice to the people.' But his inspiration, while based in Islam, is not sourced from Islam alone: 'Also why I do this is because of my personal commitment to the people of Aceh.'

While many members of GAM have become so through family contacts, Munawar said that he came to GAM independently. 'I became a supporter because of

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<sup>20</sup> The Inong Balee, is an AGAM women's battalion, primarily comprised of widows and daughters of slain AGAM fighters. The Inong Balee wore the Islamic headscarf (*hejab*, or *jilbab* in Indonesian) along with camouflage uniforms, and were armed with AK-47 assault rifles.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with the author, Helsinki, 13 August 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Narrative of the life of the Prophet Muhammad (*sallallahu alaiyhi wa sallam*) and what he approved.

my reading of the history of Aceh,' he said. 'I don't have any relatives in GAM. It is my own motivation to be GAM because of what I see.' Munawar said his first experience of inequality was after he completed his elementary study. 'I went to Java to continue my study. I found that it is very different between Java and Aceh; in the faces of the people, in Aceh they are suffering, in Java they are relaxed. The infrastructure; in my village we didn't have any electricity, no asphalt road, no cleaning, they have everything in Java. This is injustice, I was on fire. I saw very well the discrimination against the people of Aceh by the government of Java.'

'I understand that justice is a whole thing in terms of humanity,' Munawar said, indicating that justice in social and political life and justice in Islam were not separate. 'The people of Aceh can get their rights. To do obligations, all of ones' duty, is to help the people.' According to Siapno, *al din al muamallah* (social interaction) '... is the way you treat people. It doesn't matter if you pray five times a day, fast during Ramadhan, give alms to the poor, go on pilgrimage to Mecca – but if you have a neighbor who is starving or who is being treated unjustly and you continue to sleep contently at night – then you are not a Muslim. Islam is your moral behaviour towards other people'.

On this sense of moral behavior, Munawar also noted that his sense of obligation came not just from Islam but also from being a human being. 'As humans we have an obligation to do good things, to help other people,' he said. 'It is to help them get all their rights without any restrictions.' Munawar also highlighted the egalitarian aspects of Islam. 'Equality; it's very respectful. It is our faith to be equal between poor and rich, between men and women, between small and big. We call it *musaawat*. It is equality.' According to Munawar, equality, both in Islam and in secular society, was linked to justice. 'It is also in our faith to have justice, for every color of



people, every level of the people, must get the justice. Women must get justice. ... Is there a link to Aceh?' he asked rhetorically. 'Sure,' he said, answering his own question. 'What happened in Aceh is injustice. It is a restriction of the rights of the people. We want to change it.'

Again referring to the commonality between Islam and his political belief, Munawar said: 'The most important things that, even if I am not Muslim, but they are oppressed, living under injustice, I will fight the same way to deliver justice for them.' But, he acknowledged, 'It is a Muslim principle. What we need to do is love each other, no matter what religion somebody is or what race, what gender or what level he has in society. We need to love each other to make justice all over the world. We need to love Muslims, we need to love non-Muslims. That is the only way to save the world.'

According to Nur Djuli, being Acehnese and Muslim is one and the same, even if it is understood within Aceh in a specifically Acehnese way:

'... we Acehnese do have our own ways, those ways are not necessarily the same as practiced by others, and while we are not saying that our ways are better, we do not want others to dictate their ways to us either. The fact is, for us Acehnese the rituals of the religion are less important than moral attitude. For Acehnese, being Acehnese is being Muslim. We live the religion, from birth to death. We do not need a label or proof to tell the world we are Muslim. We do not need laws to force ourselves, much less others, to practice the religion. We have been and still are practicing our religion, even under oppression. Islam has never fallen in Aceh, hence there is no necessity to fight for it; it is as strong as ever. For Acehnese, it is

our freedom, not our religion, that has fallen and that is why, and for what, the Acehese are struggling. In fact it is the demand of our religion that we fight for freedom, not the other way around that we need freedom in order to be able to practice our religion. It is in this context that the ASNLF has totally rejected the introduction by Jakarta of the so-called Syariat Law for Aceh. Following the introduction of this law, the provincial government has duly formed the religious police, whose very first act was to chase unveiled women in the streets. This was not in keeping with the wishes or beliefs of us Acehese.' (Djuli 2005:8)

Malik Mahmud concurred, saying: 'It is not compulsory that it (*syariah*) should be adopted or used by every Muslim society or country in the world, hence GAM's rejection of *syariah* from Jakarta.'

One important idea that was repeated by members of the negotiating team during the Helsinki peace talks was that while the outcome of that process, by way of example, would be a consequence of God's will, God had also endowed people with intelligence, will and capacity. That is, it was beholden upon good Muslims not to be passive in the face of injustice, but to actively pursue the struggle against it. That is, God's will would be realized only with the discretionary participation of his creation; people. This had two consequences. The first consequence was, in accordance with an understanding of the will of God, it is the intention (*niat*) of the struggle and method by which it is carried out that is important, not the outcome. As such, the end of the struggle cannot justify all possible methods, which is the main reason why the Aceh conflict was confined to Aceh and did not spread, via terrorism, to Indonesia's many

vulnerable cities. According to Nur Djuli, 'the hardest part of the Acehese struggle [was] ... to maintain our dignity and religious belief in facing such an uncivilized, barbaric and inhuman enemy.' Maintaining this dignity was, he said, 'our true *jihad*.' That is, just behavior remained a guiding principle of Acehese Islam. The second consequence was that, endowed with intelligence, will and capacity, it was beholden upon believers to create a political system imbued with justice. Accepting the election of a leader and a council, and including tolerance of difference and a type of separation of powers, Islam in Aceh established the key prerequisites for the successful implementation of democracy.

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