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Dark forces still at work in Aceh, Indonesia

by [Damien Kingsbury \(http://www.crikey.com.au/author/damienkingsbury/\)](http://www.crikey.com.au/author/damienkingsbury/)

In a couple of weeks, Aceh will hold its second gubernatorial elections since the 2005 peace agreement that ended almost three decades of separatist war. After five years of relative peace and stability, the main political tensions appear to be between competing factions of the former Free Aceh Movement (GAM). Other, more troubling tensions are, however, just below the surface.

There is little to divide the main factions competing in the elections. The incumbent governor, Irwandi Yusuf, has overseen the development of a universal health care system, expanded education, overseen underlying economic growth and banned logging in Aceh's spectacular rainforest.

His main electoral opponent, GAM's former "Foreign Minister", Dr Zaini Abdullah, also supports such programs. Apart from personalities, the division between them might be characterised as one of the latter being more conservative and the former more progressive.

Supporters of both candidates have clashed in the past and tensions between them are running high. But the real problems facing Aceh's post-conflict political stability appear to be coming from elsewhere.

Over the past few years, there has been a series of unexplained shootings and hand-grenade attacks against local Acehnese leaders, resulting in a handful of deaths and an increasing climate of fear. Each of the factions contesting the elections has suspected the other.

Many, however, are looking to other forces operating in Aceh, who yearn for a return to a higher level of military involvement in and control over Aceh's affairs and finances. There have been instances where the military was clearly involved in attacks against former GAM members. But many are also persuaded by circumstantial evidence.

The belief among an increasing number in Aceh is that, as it has done so successfully elsewhere in the past, the military is fomenting discord to spark conflict in which it can claim to return as the disinterested peace maker.

A more blunt version of this tactic was used in East Timor in 1999, where the military tried to claim it was a neutral party in fighting between pro-independence guerrillas and pro-integration militias. A more subtle version of this tactic has also been used in Sulawesi, West Papua and Ambon where, coincidentally, communal violence has again broken out.

For a people hardened to decades of violence, it will probably take more than agents provocateur to genuinely destabilise Aceh's peace. As with East Timor, violence is often motivation for exercising a vote, rather than a reason not to.

But recidivism remains a force in Indonesia, playing out in Aceh. I was going to discuss political matters with friends in Aceh when this recidivism struck. Harking back to the dark days of Suharto's era of clumsy repression and control, I was stopped at immigration control and put on the next plane out of the country.

My deportation is unimportant but, as an attempt to control the flow of information, it remains illustrative.

Although having been banned (with varying degrees of success) from entering Indonesia since December 2004, I have never been formally told I am banned, much less given a reason. I was, however, once offered by an Indonesian diplomat that if I wrote articles supportive of Indonesia's more problematic policies, my status could be reconsidered. Another academic also banned in 2004 was cited by this diplomat as having been made the same offer and has since been free to enter Indonesia.

My analysis of Indonesia's politics has been broadly supportive of its reform process. A paper intended to be published next month is more qualified, reflecting what many consider to be a stalling of that reform process.

Indonesia's ban on me matters little. Technology largely circumvents what was once a limitation on accessing information. What is of concern, however, is that elements within Indonesia believe, in an era of "reform", that such a policy is appropriate.

But, then, it appears that some elements in Indonesia also believe that it is appropriate to destabilise the democratic process in Aceh, risking plunging its people back into war.

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