

Peace at last?

The latest agreement in Aceh seems too good to be true, but it's also Aceh's best chance for peace yet.

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On 15 August, representatives of the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement, or GAM, signed a Memorandum of Understanding to settle the Aceh conflict. Nobody should underplay the magnitude of this achievement. It was a remarkable step toward ending a conflict that has caused great suffering over the last 29 years.

The breakthrough was made possible, above all, by GAM leaders announcing last February that they were ready to set aside their goal of Acehnese independence and instead accept 'self-government' within Indonesia. In the past, GAM had been prepared to settle for nothing less than independence, so this compromise was both unexpected and crucial. Their motivations had a lot to do with recent military set-backs in the field. They also feared that the renewed international interest in promoting peace since last December's tsunami could quickly evaporate. Whatever the reason, their compromise made subsequent progress possible.

Credit is also due to the Indonesian government. Here the chief player was Vice President Jusuf Kalla, the man *Tempo* magazine once labelled the 'Super Mario' of Indonesian politics (in tribute to the computer game character) for his seemingly limitless energy and willingness to involve himself in every possible policy matter.

Kalla might sometimes seem a figure of fun, but he proved to be a crucial sponsor of the negotiations. In the past, government negotiators lacked high-level support and were frequently dragged along by the weight of hardline opinion. This time, Kalla was prepared to explain publicly why the peace

process required compromise. He even reprimanded security officials who argued that force was the only solution.

With Kalla's backing (and, ultimately, that of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, or SBY), the government negotiators made some



An Acehnese man looks towards the future WORLD VISION

crucial compromises. Above all, they agreed to allow (within 18 months) the establishment of local political parties in Aceh. Observers had long argued this step was imperative because without it, agreeing to peace would be tantamount to GAM signing its own death warrant.

Some observers warn that past peace deals in Aceh have broken down. But these earlier agreements, including the 'Humanitarian Pause' of mid 2000 and the 'Cessation of Hostilities Agreement' at the end of 2002, were essentially just ceasefires accompanied by

plans for negotiations on a political solution. The two sides had never agreed on the question of Aceh's future status.

This time around, prospects should be better. A political solution is in place, at least in broad outline. But there are still plenty of dangers. The details of the agreement are poorly elaborated and will be interpreted in conflicting ways by GAM and the government.

There is also a tremendous reservoir of suspicion on both sides. It is almost an article of faith for GAM that the Indonesian government breaks its promises. They remember that after an earlier revolt in the 1950s, Aceh was given 'special territory' status, but was soon administered in much the same way as any other province. GAM leaders and their sympathisers will carefully scrutinise every step the government takes, ready to pounce on any evidence of loss of faith. It is possible that the movement will revert to demanding independence if they think the government has once again 'betrayed' the Acehnese.

Meanwhile, government and military people will monitor GAM for evidence of equivocation in its newfound commitment to Indonesian unity. The security apparatus is full of people who are aghast at the notion of compromising with separatists. Calls for GAM to immediately disarm, dissolve and abandon any ambiguity on independence will be loud and insistent.

But a complete breakdown is just as unlikely as complete success. Experiences of peace processes elsewhere, from Northern Ireland to Sri Lanka, suggest that dramatic breakthroughs can quickly become bogged down in detail, backsliding and factionalism, without disintegrating altogether. Old divisions can break down amidst splintering and realignments on both sides.

Some former rebels may smell a sell-out and want to go back to armed struggle. Among the security forces and their allies, some will want to continue the dirty war.

So things are likely to be messy. But slow progress can be made if the parties keep their eyes on the end goal. At least there is now a starting point for peace.

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