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MVZ489 Causes of Political Violence

Explaining Conflict over Aceh

Course paper

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Introduction

Indonesia is large, relatively poor and natural resource-rich country with history of political violence. Although Indonesia has indeed frequently suffered from violent conflict, only the conflict between Indonesian government and GAM (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, Aceh Freedom Movement) over the province of Aceh qualifies as civil war, with over 1000 deaths in 1990, 1991, 2000, 2001 and 2002¹ (Ross 2005: 35). The conflict in Aceh raged in three intervals from the mid-1970s until the establishment of peace in 2005. Its relatively unique dynamics are not the whole story, however. Acehnese conflict is useful and suitable case study for application and testing of many theories that aim to explain political conflict – we can notice this fact if we consider the conflict's multi-faceted character. Contrary to that, however, the conflict's quite complicated nature makes it difficult to explain through the lens of narrowly defined theory. And that is why I have decided to put the conflict into wider context of theoretical approach proposed by F. Stewart and G. Brown that somewhat combines aspects of greed and grievance theses.

In the first section of the paper, I outline the core arguments of the theoretical approach employed. In the next section, I briefly go through the roots and dynamics of the conflict over Aceh. In a third section, I aim to explain the conflict by means of aforementioned approach. The conclusion reviews which parts of the approach are relevant to the Acehnese conflict and which are more or less irrelevant.

¹ War in East Timor in 1975, for example, does not qualify as civil war, since Indonesian forces were technically invading foreign territory.

1 Theoretical Perspective

As far as theory is concerned, the paper will derive from approach proposed by Frances Stewart and Graham Brown. These authors argue that a straightforward causal connection between poverty and conflict is oversimplified², and instead strive to elaborate more complex approach to the economic causes of contemporary civil wars. It is desirable to note that the authors do not disregard explanations stemming from ethnic and religious differences completely, but rather consider them to be insufficient per se (i.e. such explanations should be supported by other causations). Based on their analyses, the authors identify four main economic explanations of conflict: (1) group motives and inequalities; (2) individual gains from conflict; (3) failure of the social contract; and (4) environmental pressures or the “green war” (Stewart and Brown 2007: 221).

Although each of these explanations is able to dominate different types of conflict, it is important to keep in mind that causes and dynamics of any single conflict are usually very intricate and generally involve features of many, if not all, aforementioned perspectives (Stewart and Brown 2007: 227).

1.1 Group Motivation and Group Inequalities

Groups fighting in political conflicts unify their followers via common purposes or group motives that take form of ethnic or religious identities. Such identities provide a powerful source of mobilization and unity. According to the authors, however, the majority of people does not perceive these identities as prime or even sufficient source of conflict since wide range of multiethnic and multireligious societies live in peace. Therefore, we should look beyond ethnicity and religion to capture the arguably most important underlying differences in access to economic and political resources that provide groups with sufficiently enough stimulus to fight and to transform ethnic and religious differences into violent conflicts (Stewart and Brown 2007: 221-222).

² This illustrates the fact that some middle-income or even high-income countries suffer (or have suffered in the past) from violent conflict – as is the case of Northern Ireland, and some low-income countries, on the contrary, exist more or less peacefully – as for example Tanzania and Zambia (Stewart and Brown 2007: 219).

Stewart defines these underlying differences among established groups as horizontal inequalities (HIs), as opposed to vertical inequalities that represent asymmetries among isolated individuals and households (Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug 2013: 31). HIs may have four basic dimensions: (a) *economic HIs*, resulting from inequalities in access to and ownership of assets – financial, human social and natural resource-based, as well as from inequalities in income levels and employment opportunities; (b) *social HIs*, arising from inequalities in access to a range of services, such as education, health care or housing; (c) *political HIs*, caused by inequalities in distribution of political power at various levels and uneven representation in army, bureaucracy and police; and (d) *cultural HIs* that include disparities in the recognition and standing of different groups' languages, customs and norms (Stewart 2010: 7).

Each society or group attributes different importance to each of these HIs. The evidence, however, generally suggests that economic and social HIs provide the conditions that lead to discontent among population and, subsequently, to political mobilization, but it is the political exclusion that is probable to set off a conflict (Stewart and Brown 2007: 223). Whether such conflict becomes violent depends on the ability of political system to deal with respective HIs.

1.2 Private Motivation

The private motivation hypothesis is anchored in rational choice economics and claims that conflicts produce benefits as well as costs for some people. The net economic advantage, then, motivates some individuals (usually leaders) to initiate and maintain conflicts so as to fulfill their economic needs. In a similar vein, war offers unemployed and uneducated young people employment as soldiers and provides opportunity to loot, trade arms, smuggle, realize illicit production and business etc. According to this explanation, conflicts are likely to be numerous and long where alternative opportunities are few and the possibilities of enrichment by war are significant. Since the private motives are usually concealed with appeals to group identities, they are difficult to identify. This explanation is generally the case of conflicts over natural resources, although private incentives are scarcely sufficient without usage of other variables. That is why this explanation is usually closely linked to HIs (Stewart and Brown 2007: 224-225).

1.3 Failure of the Social Contract

According to this hypothesis, people accept state authority as long as the state delivers services and provides reasonable economic conditions in terms of employment and income. Deterioration of economic performance and worsening provision of state services leads to the weakening of social contract and eventually to its breakdown. Whether violence follows such a development or not is highly dependent on political institutions and their ability to cope with these difficulties. Evidence shows that poor states and hybrid political systems are generally more prone to conflict than for example countries with high per capita income or established democracies and rigid authoritarian regimes (Stewart and Brown 2007: 226).

1.4 “Green War” (Environmental Scarcity)

The “green war” explanation of violent conflict is associated with contest for control over decreasing amount of natural resources, often interconnected with population and environmental pressures that impact especially poor societies (Stewart and Brown 2007: 226). Percival and Homer-Dixon (1998: 280) define three types of environmental scarcity that can lead to conflict: (a) *supply-induced scarcity*, caused by degradation and depletion of environmental resources; (b) *demand-induced scarcity*, resulting from population growth or increased consumption of resources; and (c) *structural scarcity*, arising from uneven distribution of resources in society. In addition to the above mentioned hypothesis, the authors identify two more factors necessary for civil violence to be initiated. These are strong collective identities of groups and advantageous opportunities for violent collective action.

2 Conflict Overview

Dynamics of conflict over northern province of Sumatra, Aceh have been rather complicated. The roots of the conflict can be found in 1950s. After the declaration of Indonesian independence in 1949, the province of Aceh was granted a large degree of autonomy. The autonomy was few years later withdrawn, which led to the Darul Islam movement. The first Acehese rebellion was brought to an end by President Sukarno who renewed Acehese autonomy in 1959. However, a firm approach of General Suharto resulted once again in removal of the autonomy in mid-1960s. (Uppsala Conflict Data Project 2015: Indonesia).

Most recent period of conflict in Aceh can be divided into three separate phases, as defined by Michael L. Ross (Ross 2005: 35). For the sake of simplicity, these stages will be called GAM I, II and III. Table 1 shows casualties per each interval as well as notable increase in quantity of GAM followers.

<i>Organization</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Active members</i>	<i>Casualties</i>
GAM I	1976–79	25–200	>100
GAM II	1989–91	200–750	1990–92: 2,000–10,000
GAM III	1999–	15–27,000	1999: 393 2000: 1,041 2001: 1,700 2002: 1,230

Table 1: Stages of Conflict (source: Ross 2005: 36).

GAM I began in 1976 and ended in 1979, with the sparse and ill-equipped rebel organization being relatively easily suppressed by the Indonesian army. GAM itself has been founded by Tengku Hasan M. di Tiro and during the first phase of the conflict was composed mainly of intellectuals who declared Acehese independence in 1976. After the rebellion was suppressed, most of the GAM members were exiled, imprisoned or executed.

GAM II took place from 1989 to 1991 and was put down at the cost of severe security measures on the part of Indonesian government, as the insurgents were larger and better prepared for the conflict. Dissatisfaction over Indonesian policy in Aceh cumulated during eighties and eventually resulted in revival of

GAM. Increasing violent incidents led Indonesian government to launch a large-scale military campaign against GAM followers as well as Aceh civilians.

The final phase, GAM III, started in 1999 as a consequence of economic crisis of 1997, Indonesian domestic political change and referendum in East Timor in 1998 (Špičánová 2011: 143). Throughout the 1990s, the GAM strengthened its position in province, being able to set up alternative local administrations at the end of decade. GAM also managed to extract some financial resources from areas under its control, which resulted in rebels being larger and better equipped than ever before. Thus, GAM was able to challenge Indonesian government's sovereignty and rule over the province, with numerous areas under its control and government-in-exile in Sweden.

Simultaneously, negotiations between representatives of GAM and Indonesian government began in 2000. The negotiation process went through its ups and downs, with Indonesian government restoring its offensive in province several times over a period of 2001-2004. A devastating tsunami that hit province of Aceh in December 2004 and caused serious humanitarian crisis (with death toll exceeding 160 000 Acehnese) was followed by ceasefires and a peace agreement in August 2005, which effectively terminated the conflict. As a result, the peace agreement granted Aceh large autonomy and economic concessions and demobilized and reintegrated GAM rebels into society, among other things (McCarthy 2007: 326).

3 Explaining the Conflict

If we commence our examination of the conflict in year 1949 (i.e. Indonesian independence), we can identify several periods, during which the underlying causes (or HIs) of conflict changed and gradually accumulated.

Conflict over Aceh is usually termed as intrastate ethnonationalist and separatist friction between Acehese rebels and Indonesian government. Ethnonationalism, however, was not the fundamental cause of the conflict. On the contrary, at the turn of the 1940s and the 1950s, the Acehese perceived their collective identity to be compatible with that of independent Indonesia and so they supported the creation of one nation as long as it recognized cultural heterogeneity of the region and preserved autonomous areas accordingly (Špičánová 2011: 137). Darul Islam movement was, then, caused by a fact that Indonesian government did not respect the promise it gave to Acehese and withdrawn its autonomy few years after gaining independence. This act was further amplified by a decision of Indonesian government to secularize Indonesian political system and classify Islam as nothing more than one of the five state religions. Although Sukarno reestablished Acehese autonomy in 1959, this situation did not last long, as General Suharto initiated his “New Order” administration in the mid-1960s. This project envisaged that stability of such a diverse country can be achieved only through political centralization and homogenization. As a result, Aceh has been once again incorporated into province of Northern Sumatra and was regarded as periphery subject to power and decision-making of Jakarta.

From what has been written so far, it is obvious that it was neither ethnonationalism (since Acehese did not strive for complete independence) nor economic motivations that brought about the roots of the conflict in the first place. Rather, Acehese concerns about marginalization of Islam in the country and overall weakening position of Aceh in political system of Indonesia to the benefit of center fuelled Acehese discontent and laid the foundations for future escalation. It follows that the most important horizontal inequality in this period was political: threat of political exclusion of Acehese and their subordination to Jakarta.

Suharto's political regime did not merely centralize Indonesia politically, but also economically. In the mid-1970s, Aceh was economically the most discriminated province of the country (Špičánová 2011: 138). At the beginning of 1970s, there have been found massive reserves of crude oil and natural gas in northern Aceh. Massive extraction has followed, with vast industrial zones being constructed. Extent of the extraction can be documented by the fact that Aceh's Arun natural gas fields were for a time the world's most productive (Aspinall 2007: 952). Although the process of industrialization of province has been initially perceived positively by Acehnese (since it created some job opportunities and infrastructure in the province), the population started to experience its difficulties shortly after. Among these belonged overcrowded job market, with workers coming from other regions and abroad, pollution of the environment, overpopulation and urbanization, corruption and last but not least the disruption of traditional rural lifestyle. What is more, revenues from province's production were flowing into the center and across Indonesian borders towards foreign investors whereas high percentage of Acehnese lived below poverty line. Despite the fact that oil and natural gas resources amounted to 30% of overall Indonesian production, only 5% of revenues returned back into the province (Špičánová 2011: 141).

Beginning of extraction in the second half of the 1970s coincided with foundation of GAM and the first interval of conflict. Negative effects of discrimination and redistribution from the center associated with oil and natural gas resources were not evident yet, which is one of the reasons why GAM I was able to mobilize only a very limited number of people. Acehnese economic boom of the 1980s was apparent in all sectors of economy. In spite of this development, it was profitable only for social elite whereas the majority of population had to bear aforementioned negative aspects of industrialization. Thus, the GAM II and III were able to mobilize followers also on the grounds of socio-economic arguments.

One of the prime aims of GAM was to ensure Acehnese independent state (Schulze 2004: 6). This basically meant that from 1976 onwards, the conflict obtained its ethnonationalist dimension. The GAM elites took advantage of ethnonationalist rhetoric especially in the 1990s when it was transformed into

hateful ideology that called for purging Aceh from Javanese (Špičanová 2011: 139). The ethnonationalist line of argumentation also replaced religion, as GAM almost never stressed Islam as the main reason for rebellion. A strong mobilization incentive came also from the fact that during GAM II the Indonesian army terrorized members of GAM as well as civilians. Extensive violation of human rights contributed to gradual radicalization of the organization as well as to expansion of its ranks.

What importance should be attributed to the discovery of natural gas and oil from the perspective of private motivation is disputable. The economic horizontal inequality definitely played appreciable role in mobilization during GAM II and especially during GAM III but it took hard ideological work by nationalist political entrepreneurs to transform this unfocused discontent about natural resources into grievance and subsequently into violence (Aspinall 2007: 968). As far as sources of income of GAM are concerned, they have been threefold: taxation of areas under GAM control; foreign donations, especially from Acehnese expatriates in Malaysia; and crime, drugs (trade in marijuana) and kidnapping (Schulze 2004: 24). Thus, it is obvious that there existed various ways to fulfill individual economic motives, especially in areas under control of GAM. In general, as far as natural resources are concerned, Ross contends that it did not contribute to the onset but maybe to the duration of the conflict (Ross 2005: 52-53).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to find out which aspects of theoretical approach proposed by F. Stewart and G. Brown are suitable for explaining conflict over Aceh, Indonesia. The conflict started in the early 1950s and ended with peace agreement between Indonesian government and GAM in August 2005. Basically, the conflict can be split into four major phases: Darul Islam movement (1950s), GAM I (1976-9), GAM II (1989-1991) and GAM III (1999-2005).

The theoretical approach applied to explain the conflict uses some components of greed as well as grievance theory and identifies four alternative economic explanations of political conflicts. All in all, the most viable explanation of conflict over Aceh seems to be the *group motivation*. Decisive role is played by horizontal inequalities which, however, manifested differently in a course of the conflict.

Regarding the Darul Islam, the most important underlying cause – if not the only one – was the political HI, since the movement strove to secure its autonomy within Indonesian political system. The political HI was supplemented with common religious identity of Acehnese who were dissatisfied with the secular character of political system.

A shift of attention from religion to ethno-nationalism was characteristic to more recent intervals of the conflict, which newly introduced demand for independent Acehnese state. As for HIs, demand of political autonomy within Indonesia was from now on irrelevant. Extraction of the province's vast oil and natural gas reserves and its negative impact on lifestyle and environment of Aceh together with economic exploitation from the center, on the other hand, resulted in arrival of economic HIs, especially from the end of 1970s. It is important to note, however, that the economic HIs were considerably manipulated by GAM elites and without influence of other triggers would be unlikely to cause the conflict.

The other explanations of the approach are unable to contribute fully to the understanding of conflict over Aceh, even though they bring some noteworthy observations. The “*green war*” explanation contributes from the perspective of structural as well as supply-induced scarcity (since the industrialization of province disrupted traditional rural lifestyle of Acehnese). *Failure of the social*

contract explanation, contrarily, points toward the violation of human rights and unstable political system after the rule of General Suharto. Further, it is likely that the *private motivation* explanation has some merit as well, since the GAM organization had various ways of obtaining income within areas free from governmental control.

Although there probably are theories that would possess the ability to explain conflict over Aceh more narrowly (for example the Collier-Hoeffler model would probably argue for the fact that Aceh is relatively poor, mountainous, ethnically homogenous, dependent on export of natural resources etc.), the approach deployed here was able to capture the multidimensional nature of the conflict and to some extent reconcile certain aspects of greed and grievance theories in the process.

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