

Separatism and ethnic conflicts in indonesia



The report on Separatism and Ethnic Conflicts in Indonesia presented by Ms. Paguibitan in the class is well commendable. She has exhibited a good grasp of her topic during her report presentation and the report itself is very informative. But before I discuss and comment on the details of her report, let me first talk about the general topic, separatism and ethnic conflicts.

At a first glance, it is tempting to view separatism and ethnic conflicts as domestic problems for we easily see that the key players are the local actors, primarily the local group staging the armed resistance and the government trying to preserve the territorial integrity of the state. However, in reality, these problems do have an international character. First, as correctly mentioned in the discussion of the Aceh experience, separatism and ethnic conflicts are felt across borders especially when the secessionist groups find a safe haven in adjacent territories where the government are particularly supportive of the cause of these groups.

Most notable examples of such in the Southeast Asian region are the cross-border conflicts between Indonesia and Malaysia, Thailand and Malaysia, and the Philippines and Malaysia, among others. Several things are common in these cases: the separatist groups staging the secession are primarily Muslims; and the secessions happen in areas where the country shares border with Malaysia. These root problems are so costly that they caused diplomatic protests between these states in various degrees.

Second, separatism and ethnic conflicts are characterized by violence and killings and they have been a primary concern by different international organizations, principally the United Nations and the various international actors advocating for the protection of human rights. At some point in the

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report, this international character of separatism and ethnic conflicts in Indonesia was discussed although not thoroughly elaborated. This, however, is understandable since the thrust of Ms.

Paguibitan's report was really to explain the dynamic progression of the secession movement in Aceh, how it was peacefully resolved, and the lessons that can be learned from their experience. Content-wise, the report was very enlightening. It has revealed a historical account of Aceh sentiment since the pre-colonial times until the final resolution was achieved. It showed the picture of the struggles of the Acehnese to gain independence and the parties' contentment with the ultimate agreement granting Aceh significant autonomy. I would just like to add some points and share some comments on the content of the report.

It can be recalled that Suharto was President of Indonesia for the longest time and during his leadership, he had not been successful in resolving this secessionist problem in Aceh. The reporter mentioned two primary strategies employed by Suharto in Aceh- a military solution and transmigration. From what I have read, there were actually three strategies: Suharto's mode of dealing with Aceh combined three broad approaches. He kept potential opposition under surveillance by requiring ulama to join a state-sponsored religious council, and he coopted their support by opening up prestigious educations and jobs for their sons.

He made Aceh a site of transmigration for Javanese farmers so that pockets of immigrants were interspersed among locals. And he sent in Indonesia's armed forces to suppress opposition. Indonesia's national army had been born of the revolution. It was made up of professional soldiers under central

command and private militias of civilians committed to local leaders and specific causes. The strategy of involving civilians in killing was seen as acceptable when the enemy was Dutch, but in the 1990s the use of civilians to kill their compatriots in Aceh came to be viewed differently.

Indonesian troops were accused in the newly freed media of kidnapping, torture, rape, and forced relocation of Acehnese, and of fomenting divisions among them. Moreover, the focus of the discussion was primarily on the separatist sentiment of the Acehnese. It is also important to point out that the unilateral response of the Indonesian government to solve this problem actually sparked a new one- ethnic conflict between the Acehnese and the in-migrating Javanese workers and the predominantly Javanese military. This perhaps led to the failure of the Suharto government to address the unrest in Aceh for instead of solving the root problem, the supposed-to-be solution only starts another problem. On the technicalities, there were some terms that were not adequately explained by the presenter in her report, namely, Four Wise Men and Henry Dunant Centre. It is also noticeable that all the references listed at the end of her presentation are all up-to-date. However, they are all internet sources. Perhaps, a few good books or chapters of edited volumes could have added much information about the topic in general. But again, all in all, the report is very informative.