

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Djalan Djeruk 4
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Mr. W. S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York City 36

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Indonesia has been described as "a string of emeralds flung across the equator." This pretty image is inadequate to suggest the natural glory and human diversity of these islands, but it will do very nicely as a description of Indonesia's basic political problem. A string of emeralds breaks easily. If the complex threads of Indonesian unity are to wear thin and break, the first jewel to fall may well be Atjeh, the Moslem stronghold at the northwestern tip of Sumatra.

I recently spent ten days in Atjeh as guest of the powerful All-Atjeh Federation of Ulama and returned to Medan with the impression that proud Atjeh does not want independence so much as it wants wider administrative autonomy and speedier economic development. It is impossible to predict what will happen if these claims are not met. Discontent and disillusionment are evident in Atjeh, and the internal homogeneity of the area would allow a desire for independence to be quickly translated into organized action. But for the present, Atjeh lives in an atmosphere of watchful waiting rather than open restiveness. The quiet in Atjeh is ominous rather than reassuring.

At the end of July, I left Medan armed with an assortment of rumours, most of them speaking of the mounting political tension in Atjeh during the recent cabinet crisis. The most imaginative of these claimed that the formation of an openly left-wing cabinet in Djakarta would find Atjeh in open revolt under the banner of Darul Islam, the Moslem rebellious movement in West Java. Another rumour claimed that the famous Teungku Daud Beureueh had already been appointed Darul Islam commander for Atjeh; the report seemed to be given credence by the arrest of his personal secretary in Djakarta just before my departure.

Somewhat skeptical of my rumors, I arrived in Kutaradja, the sleeping, wind-washed capital of Atjeh. My immediate task was the collection of material about Islam in Atjeh, but in the back of my mind was the hope of seeing the renowned Daud Beureueh. The most serious rebellions in Indonesia's short history have been launched on the commands of "strong men": Kartosuwirjo in West Java, Kahar Muzakkar in South Sulawesi. In infant trouble-plagued Indonesia, the general conditions of revolt seem always to be present. The margin between disorder and peace often lies in the attitudes and idiosyncrasies of a single leader with the power of command. Teungku Daud Beureueh is such a leader. Several days after my arrival in Kutaradja, I was on my way to his village

for an interview, accompanied by the cordial District Officer (Bupati) of Sigli.

Daud Beureueh is widely known as the Military Governor of Atjeh during the revolutionary years, yet he is living quietly now in his village, in apparent retirement. After Atjeh entered the unitary Republic of Indonesia two years ago, Daud Beureueh was given the honorary title of governor and asked to come to Djakarta as adviser to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. He did not accept the honor. His only major public act during these two years has been chairmanship of the Medan Ulama Conference last April. After the conference, Daud Beureueh made a short tour of Atjeh, presenting fiery speeches in favor of an Islamic State. He then returned to his village, where---to the amazement of sophisticated Medan residents---he is building a large brick and concrete mosque with his own hands.

As we drove south from Sigli, I asked the District Officer about Daud Beureueh's present status. He said that the former military governor has actually been far from inactive. Because of his immense prestige with the village people and the ulama of Atjeh, Daud Beureueh is constantly called upon to settle disputes and give advice. His busy life is devoted mostly to trips to neighboring villages and to receiving delegations and guests in his own village. Apparently, such a life has more substance for Daud Beureueh than an honorary post in far-off Djakarta. I have heard that Daud Beureueh becomes dispirited and "lazy" in Djakarta, when he is denied contact with the Atjehese people. Like many other popular leaders, he is nourished and driven by personal contact with his followers; they in turn are dependent on his strong personality to express their deepest hopes for an improvement in their lot.

Our car had just passed through the noisy market place of Daud Beureueh's village, when we saw the half-completed mosque. If Daud Beureueh is the key to an understanding of Atjeh, I found that this structure---substantial but uncompleted---is symbolic of Daud Beureueh's character and present attitude.

On the far side of the mosque, the car turned abruptly into a coconut grove. The panorama of fallow rice fields and distant blue mountains was lost, and we jolted along toward a neat white stucco house. Daud Beureueh came out to meet us, smiling and impeccably dressed in pressed trousers, white shirt, and black velvet petjis (the fez-like Indonesian hat). We were soon seated around the front room tea-table, that ubiquitous symbol of Indonesian sociability. As we traded preliminary information about ourselves, I noticed the two hanging tapestries of scenes from Arabia, the raised, rug-covered dias, several small pictures of mosques, and the severe scrubbed cleanliness of the room. The room showed simplicity, prosperity and discipline.

Daud Beureueh looked the retired military man, rather than the religious scholar which his title teungku indicates. His spare, powerful figure was straight but relaxed in his chair. From below his petjis, closely trimmed grey hair contrasted with a youthful

tanned face. He was speaking directly, but his eyes had a vague look of preoccupation, like those of a simple man with a perplexing problem. Suddenly, he spoke his mind with almost childlike earnestness. I felt that his companions were slightly embarrassed as he made his straight-forward statement:

" You should know that we in Atjeh have a dream. We dream of the days of Sultan Iskandar Muda when Atjeh was an Islamic State. In those days, the government had two branches, civil and military, both established and run according to the teachings of Islam. Such a government could provide for all modern needs. Now we dream of returning to such a system of government."

I asked him if such government could solve the current problems of Atjeh. "Yes. Take irrigation as an example. During the age of Iskandar Muda, a canal was dug from a river eleven kilometers from here to the sea. The region of Pidie became very prosperous. Another canal was dug not far from the first, both the work of ulama. Unlike the ulama of today, the leaders of that era were not afraid to get their sarongs muddy. Now these canals are ruined, and rice production has fallen. Before the war, Atjeh used to export rice to support the entire East Sumatra area. Now we import rice from Burma." In his dream, he saw a prosperous Atjeh under the leadership of a regenerated group of ulama. In the golden days, only the truly learned could become ulama, while in modern times, almost anyone can claim the right to be called "teungku".

Daud Beureueh was speaking with power and righteousness about the need for reform. I could understand why the District officer had compared him to the magnificent Sukarno as a crowd orator. When the two speak on the same program, it is said that Sukarno comes out second-best if the audience is Atjehnese, especially if the "lion of Atjeh" has been moved to indignation or anger.

As he went on speaking about Islamic rule for Atjeh. I got the feeling that my Medan rumours had led me far astray. It seemed obvious that he was talking about an Islamic State for all of Indonesia and not just for an independent Atjeh. He tried to convince me that religious freedom would be guaranteed in such a state, emphasizing the great tolerance for Christianity in past Islamic states in the Near East. Christians would be free and protected in an Indonesian Islamic State, yet Moslems cannot feel truly free unless they live in a state based on the teachings of the Koran. When I asked if this attitude was not a bit contradictory, he pointed out that, as a democratic country, Indonesia must bow to the wishes of the Moslem majority. He was confident that the Moslem parties would win a clear victory in a general election.

Daud Beureueh sees three groups in Indonesia today: Communists who want an atheistic Marxist state, Moslems who want an Islamic State, and certain nationalists who wish to revive Javanese Hinduism. He is afraid that the Hinduists and Marxists are gaining ground, but still fear a general election in which they would surely lose. For this reason he thinks that they will move heaven and earth

to prevent an early election.

The Medan Ulama Conference is proof, according to Daud Beureueh, that Islam is more united than before the war. He claims that the tension between "young" and "conservative" groups ended in the thirties. One sign of the new unity is the scant attention being paid to differences between the schools of Moslem law. (The Sjafi'i school is predominant in Indonesia.) He then amused us with stories of the ignorant and superstitious religious teachers of former times who declared that western clothes and haircuts were forbidden by Moslem law. The most conservative religious teachers still believe that all western habits are evil, but they don't dare say so outside their villages. To his mind, the fussy conservatism that was common in Atjeh until very recently was based on ignorance of Islamic law; the progress of recent years has made it appear foolish.

There is a popular prejudice in Java and in many parts of Sumatra that Islam in Atjeh is encrusted with superstition and ignorance. I feel that this view is largely mistaken, for it ignores the great changes brought about in the last three decades by the All-Atjeh Federation of Ulama, usually referred to as PUSA. The potential of fanaticism in Atjeh is probably all the greater because of the fundamentalist reform carried on by PUSA leaders such as Teungku Daud Beureueh, but it is important to realize that it is not the same type of fanaticism which sparked Atjeh's stubborn resistance to Dutch conquest at the end of the last century.

Organizationally, PUSA is a loose federation which includes most of the village religious leaders and teachers of Atjeh. The source of its power is the authority of its members in their villages and, to a certain extent, the wealth of those members like Daud Beureueh who own stores or engage in trade. PUSA does not seem to be a disciplined organization, but it is in a position to mobilize tremendous popular support when its members are united in a task.

The top leadership of PUSA, including Daud Beureueh, can be called modernist in its thinking on Moslem law and ritual. Here we should keep in mind that Modernism in Islam has many meanings. The Modernism of PUSA is fundamentalist and severe, a far cry from the Modernism of Medan and Djakarta which tends to be secular. It would seem that the stimulus to reform in Atjeh has come not from Egypt, but directly for Mecca, where a large Atjehnese colony has existed for centuries. Still, Modernism in Atjeh shares the essential aim of Modernism throughout the Moslem world: the reform and purification of Moslem belief through general and religious education, and the achievement of social and political goals through organization. Before the war, PUSA pursued its goals largely in the field of education. Under Daud Beureueh's chairmanship, PUSA established new religious schools, which included courses in general knowledge and

science, and began to reform the curriculum of the older schools run by its members. Apparently, the fundamentalist reform was already having its effect in Atjeh before the Japanese invasion. With Japan's defeat, the pace of change was greatly accelerated.

PUSA made its great bid for power during the brief and bloody social revolution which broke out in Atjeh immediately after the Japanese surrender. During the colonial years, the Dutch split the power of the defeated Sultan of Atjeh and distributed it among scores of his lesser military officers (hulubalang). The Dutch ruled effectively through these petty feudal lords, but the complicated and top-heavy system of indirect rule was extremely oppressive for the people of Atjeh. The Japanese defeat allowed a tremendous release of pent-up resentments. The religious leaders of Atjeh, most of them members of PUSA, evidently lost no time in directing these feelings against the petty nobles who had served the Dutch. The story of the liquidation of a major part of Atjeh's nobility has not yet been written, and it is not clear to what extent the leaders of PUSA condoned the brutality of their followers. The fact remains that the elimination of the nobility allowed PUSA to achieve a position of dominant power in Atjeh. In 1947, Daud Beureueh was acknowledged as military governor of Atjeh for the Republic of Indonesia, and civil and military office became the monopoly of the leaders or friends of PUSA.

One of the important facts of political life in Atjeh today is that PUSA's power was surrendered to the central government in 1951. Like Daud Beureueh, many of the ulama of PUSA refuse to participate in the new government; others are uninvited.

As I sat in Daud Beureueh's house, I realized that I had expected to speak with an impatient, angry man. I had assumed that the fall from nearly absolute power would have that effect on the former military governor. It was therefore startling to see Daud Beureueh exhibit precisely the opposite characteristic: a quiet, almost stolid patience. He openly, almost daringly, criticized the Indonesian government for its conduct of Atjehese affairs. He also made very frank suggestions about measures to improve the situation. Yet he showed no visible excitement and seemed to be continually saying, "well, we 'll wait and see."

Daud Beureueh made generally the same impression on a correspondent of the Medan newspaper Waspada, who quoted him as saying, "We in Atjeh are merely spectators." My impression was that Daud Beureueh and other Atjehese leaders are watching a performance they do not like, but that they wish to see the performance to the end before they pass final judgement.

The situation in Atjeh could easily become critical for the fledging Indonesian government. The social dislocation of the revolution and the present unsatisfactory economic situation have sharpened the feelings of discontent in the region. The central government cannot ignore the fact that PUSA is in a position to control and utilize these popular sentiments. It should also bear in mind that PUSA's top leaders have lost the position of power they held during the revolutionary years. Most disturbing

of all is the picture of Daud Beureueh---a man of popular appeal and power---brooding and waiting in his village.

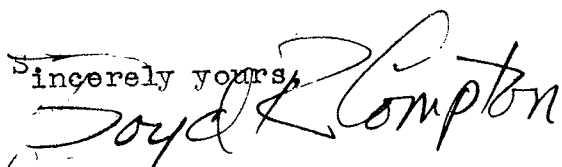
But is the situation in Atjeh actually critical at the present time? Daud Beureueh claims that the rumors of explosive dissatisfaction in Atjeh have been circulated by feudalists who lost their power during the revolution. On the face of it, it is ridiculous to think of Daud Beureueh accepting a subordinate position under Kartosuwirjo of the Darul Islam, or to imagine the powerful leaders of PUSA running to the hills to carry on a furtive guerilla campaign against the government. It would seem that their present bargaining position vis-a-vis the central government is sufficiently strong to warrant a peaceful pressing of claims. There is, of course, no certainty that PUSA's leaders share this thought.

Earlier in this letter, I indicated that the peace and quiet in Atjeh is possibly more ominous than open unrest. I gained the general impression from my short visit that Daud Beureueh and PUSA leaders exert strong control over their followers; the silence in Atjeh may merely indicate that the Moslems of Atjeh are obeying the commands of their leaders and waiting for some further development. If this is true, the alternatives in Atjeh would seem to be continued peace or large-scale, coordinated rebellion at some future date.

The impressions of a short trip, however, can be very misleading. I saw some evidence that the leaders of PUSA do not enjoy complete control over the lower levels of their organization. For example, more than half of PUSA's schools have refused to accept government subsidies, reportedly on the grounds that the size of the subsidies does not warrant the possibility of outside control. This stand is revealing, for the subsidies are administered by the PUSA-dominated branch of the Ministry of Religion in Kutaradja. It is possible that even Daud Beureueh himself is not in a position to demand the complete allegiance of the village ulama of Atjeh, at least in certain matters.

A radical improvement in the economic situation in Atjeh seems out of the question in the near future, while a further decline seems very possible in view of the condition of Indonesian state finances. The discontent among Atjeh's leaders and village people is more apt to grow than diminish.

Like Daud Beureueh's mosque, the attitude of PUSA's leaders is unfinished; they wait somewhat skeptically for a more satisfactory government policy. If the desired administrative autonomy and economic improvements are not forthcoming, the patience of Daud Beureueh and his friends may run out. Just before I left Daud Beureueh's house, he spoke for the second time of his dream of prosperous Islamic rule in Atjeh. I had the feeling that he will not be content to sit and talk and dream forever.

Sincerely yours,

 Boyd R. Compton