

# Conjuring Zones of Insecurity

## Post-Conflict Election Campaigning by Text Message in Aceh, Indonesia

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### Introduction

Information Communications Technology (ICT)'s systematic penetration into the developing world has fundamentally changed the way people at the margins communicate with one another. The spread of cheap mobile devices has spawned a wave of development initiatives falling under the umbrella of Information Communications Technology for Development (ICT4D). These initiatives are said to be 'creating new venues for people's participation and giving new voice to those who have historically been marginalized.'<sup>54</sup> Mobile devices now allow hitherto excluded communities to access banking services in Kenya,<sup>55</sup> report corruption in India,<sup>56</sup> improve health services in Peru<sup>57</sup> and Rwanda,<sup>58</sup> raise educational levels in South Africa<sup>59</sup> and Tanzania,<sup>60</sup> and monitor elections and report electoral violence in Kenya,<sup>61</sup> Nigeria<sup>62</sup> and Indonesia.<sup>63</sup> Estonia even allows citizens to vote through mobile devices.<sup>64</sup> Mobile devices also powered the 'Arab Spring' on the ground in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia.

These examples may or may not, in the clichéd benchmark of development, prove 'sustainable' over time, but they do represent concrete examples of ICT4D's transformational possibilities. We would insert an important caveat that ICT tools bear the moralities of their wielders. In this collection, Sambuli and Awori (pp. 27-31) discuss how mobile and digital technologies may have played a catalysing role in the Kenyan 2007/08 post-election violence, and how the Umati project was created to track and counter such use in 2013.

In Afghanistan the night-letter phenomenon of the early occupation has moved from physical letters to text messages (SMS, Short Message Service) across cell phone networks. ISIS in Iraq and Syria embraced mobile technologies more than the nascent democrats in any preceding Arab Spring. Where we work in Indonesia, mobile technologies have been widely embraced in politics and elections, especially among gangster, police, military, and militia groups, to intimidate and manipulate outcomes. A differentiated spectrum of ICT is deployed across the archipelago: in Jakarta, youth gangs taunt one another and arrange fights and ambushes via Twitter.<sup>65</sup> In Maluku, e-rumour-mongering in the ethno-religious fracture zones of urban Ambon leads to arson, assaults and murders.<sup>66</sup> In Aceh, threats via SMS were readily adopted to extort from contractors in the post-tsunami reconstruction boom, but the use of SMS in that province has had more widespread impact through the cultivation of pervasive and ephemeral environments of insecurity that arrive with every election cycle. Most frustrating is that while these SMSs add to a feeling of insecurity that can penetrate uninvolved households, there is little concrete action that can be taken against them (see Ayala, pp. 19-21; see also Sambuli and Awori, pp. 27-31).

The quarter-century conflict between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (known by their Indonesian acronym GAM, from Gerakan Aceh Merdeka) was distinguished by sporadic separatist violence and brutal counter-insurgency operations.

<sup>54</sup> UNDP. (2012). Mobile Technologies and Empowerment: Enhancing human development through participation and innovation. Available from: <https://www.undpegov.org/mgov-primer.html>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>55</sup> Karugu, W. N. and Mwendwa, T. (2007). Vodafone and Safaricom Kenya: Extending the Range and Reliability of Financial Services to the Poor in Rural Kenya. UNDP. Available from: [http://growinginclusivemarkets.org/media/cases/Kenya\\_MPESA\\_2008.pdf](http://growinginclusivemarkets.org/media/cases/Kenya_MPESA_2008.pdf). [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>56</sup> <http://ipaidabribe.com>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>57</sup> <http://healthmarketinnovations.org/program/nacer>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>58</sup> UN. (Undated). Tracnet, Rwanda: Fighting Pandemics through Information Technology. Available from: [http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/publications/africa\\_casestudies/tracnet.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/publications/africa_casestudies/tracnet.pdf). [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>59</sup> <http://www.cominit.com/africa/content/dr-math>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>60</sup> Trucano, M. (2009). Checking in with BridgelT in Tanzania: Using mobile phones to support teachers. World Bank. 25 Sept. Available from: <http://blogs.worldbank.org/edutech/checking-in-with-bridgelt-in-tanzania>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>61</sup> <http://www.usahidi.com>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.reclaimnaija.net/>

<sup>63</sup> <http://www.kawalpemilu.org>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>64</sup> ICT Statistics Newslog. (2011). Estonians Vote in Parliamentary Election by Mobile Phone. 7 March. Available from: <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/newslog/Estonians+Vote+In+Parliamentary+Election+By+Mobile+Phone.aspx>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>65</sup> Anderson, B. and Snyder, J. (2013). Coming of Age in the Urban Kampung: Gang Demographics and Territories in Select Jakarta Neighborhoods – Preliminary Findings. A paper presented at the European Association for South East Asian Studies Conference, Lisbon, Portugal, 2-5 July 2013. Available from: [https://www.academia.edu/3849904/Coming\\_of\\_Age\\_in\\_the\\_Urban\\_Kampung\\_Gang\\_Demographics\\_and\\_Territories\\_in\\_Select\\_Jakarta\\_Neighborhoods-Preliminary\\_Findings](https://www.academia.edu/3849904/Coming_of_Age_in_the_Urban_Kampung_Gang_Demographics_and_Territories_in_Select_Jakarta_Neighborhoods-Preliminary_Findings). [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>66</sup> Spyer, P. (2002). Fire without smoke and other phantoms of Ambon's violence: Media effects, agency, and the work of imagination. *Indonesia*. 74. pp. 21-36. Available from: <http://cip.cornell.edu/DPubs?service=UI&version=1.0&verb=Display&handle=seap.indo/1106939683>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

The conflict ended in August 2005, when the Helsinki peace agreement was signed, catalysed in part by the promise of enough lucrative spoils for all former adversaries in Aceh's post-tsunami reconstruction economy. By mid-2008, former GAM separatists were preparing to contest seats in Aceh's provincial and district assemblies for the first time with their newly formed local political party, Partai Aceh (PA). The allowance for Aceh to field local parties in the April 2009 legislative elections was the first of its kind in Indonesia, and a benchmark achievement for GAM in the peace agreement.

### Polarising the electorate

In mid-2008, while one of us (JHG) conducted ethnographic field research and the other (BA) implemented reintegration and stabilisation projects for post-conflict recovery in Aceh, we noticed that interviewees and other local partners in our work would routinely take out their cell phones to show us the frequently anonymous, political text messages they had received to illustrate ongoing tensions among conflict-era adversaries. One of the most memorable text messages was written in traditional Acehnese verse and sent anonymously to the cell phones of a select group of ex-GAM rebels who were not on the best of terms with their former comrades now campaigning for Partai Aceh:

A YOUNG CHILD GATHERS RATTAN IN THE MOUNTAINS OF MEUREUDU / FIND THE BEST TO MAKE A BASKET / NOW IT IS ALMOST ELECTION SEASON / IT IS TIME TO CHOOSE A THRONE FOR THE KING / HEAD OVER THERE TO GAM'S PARTY / HAVE NO DOUBTS MY BROTHER / WHOEVER DOES NOT CHOOSE THE DESCENDANTS OF ACEHNESE KINGS / JUST MOVE TO JAVA / NO NEED TO STAY ANYMORE IN ACEH / JUST GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE<sup>67</sup>

Recipients of this poetic intimidation were all GAM ex-combatants who surrendered before the peace agreement and underwent formal reeducation sponsored by the Indonesian military (Tentara Nasional Indonesia or TNI); the larger GAM conglomerate thus considers them traitors. During the final years of the conflict, these reformed ex-rebels operated as any of the other anti-separatist militia groups in Aceh with TNI backing, and in the early post-conflict era were seen as potential spoilers of the

peace process. Not to be outdone, they expressed their disappointment with GAM's leaders by widely distributing an SMS of their own:

IN THE YEAR 2000 WE RAN AWAY, FEARFUL OF POLICE AND SOLDIER'S WEAPONS. IN THE YEAR 2004 THE TSUNAMI CAME, ALLAH'S JUDGMENT THAT BROUGHT ENORMOUS WATER. IN THE YEAR 2006 THERE WAS NO MORE FIGHTING. IN THE YEAR 2007 WE INAUGURATED NEW KINGS. IN THE YEAR 2008 THEY FOUGHT AMONGST THEMSELVES. THE LEADERS OF THE LAND FORGOT TO COMPENSATE THEIR PEOPLE'S SERVICE. NOBODY CARES ABOUT THE VICTIMS OF SHOOTINGS, NOR DOES ANYBODY CARE ABOUT THE WIDOWS. THE ARISTOCRATS AND DISTRICT LEADERS ARE BUSY WITH THEIR TOYOTA LUXURY VANS. IN THE YEAR 2009 WE CHOOSE THE PEOPLE'S REPRESENTATIVES, AND AGAIN THEY BRING US PROMISES ON A HEAVENLY WIND. THOSE PROMISED A CAR WILL GET A BICYCLE. THOSE PROMISED A COFFEE WILL GET POISONED. CONGRATULATIONS TO THE LEADERS OF THIS LAND!

This exchange evokes the simmering tensions between ex-combatants, with implied threats from the first SMS and disappointment expressed by the second (a disappointment that has taken root across Aceh since those elections). Meanwhile, TNI fixated on the possibility of a resurgent separatist threat if PA won the elections. One officer at a base in East Aceh sent the following SMS to village heads in neighbouring sub-districts:

BE CAREFUL, GAM HAS BEGUN LISTING YOUR CONSTITUENTS AS MEMBERS OF THEIR POLITICAL PARTY BY FILLING IN BLANK GAM PARTY FORMS. GAM'S METHODS ARE NOT SO DIFFERENT FROM THOSE USED BY THE PKI [THE INDONESIAN COMMUNIST PARTY] IN THE PAST. DO NOT BE SEDUCED BY GAM'S DECEPTION; IT COULD BE A TRAP, BUT IF PEOPLE WANT TO THEN FEEL FREE TO FILL IN THE FORMS COMPLETELY. SHARE THIS SMS WIDELY WITH YOUR FAMILY, NEIGHBOURS, FRIENDS, ETC., SO THAT PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY ARE NOT DECEIVED, AND BECOME VICTIMS LIKE THOSE CAUGHT UP IN THE PKI'S SEPTEMBER 30TH MOVEMENT REBELLION IN 1965.

<sup>67</sup> The translations here and below are by JHG. The final verse in this message uses an unspeakably rude metaphor in Acehnese that our colleagues in Aceh insisted has no equivalent English meaning. The translation conveys the threat to leave Aceh with an equally offensive English expression.

The village head who showed it to us could not tell if the officer who sent it composed it himself or if he was simply forwarding it from another source. The message is a thinly veiled threat suggesting that the fate of PA members may resemble the fate of communists in 1965 who were massacred in the hundreds of thousands across Indonesia, including Aceh. Messages linking the fate of those who support GAM to those who were in the PKI were common in Aceh at the time, and were not limited to elections; in some reintegration programs that targeted ex-GAM in Aceh's highlands, local TNI circulated SMS messages stating that the GAM who signed up for such programs were also signing their names to 'death lists.' Anti-separatist militias in the highlands also sent out messages with similar themes.

Messages like these do not typically appear in the mass media or in analyst reports about post-conflict politics in Aceh, and yet our data and experience show that this global technology was routinely deployed to spread rumours and threats, campaign promises and political slander, poetry and invective, all across the province, often in rich Acehnese and Indonesian vernaculars. SMS technology may be the most cost-effective election campaign tool because it penetrates remote communities without requiring travel, and reaches voters and adversaries much more reliably and cheaply than telephone, radio, or television broadcasts (see Ayala, pp. 17-18). The medium also allows for anonymity; senders can terrorise individuals and communities from a distance. And they frustratingly provide little to act against. Most of these ephemeral documents transmitted across cell phone networks easily escape the archives that bear only partial historic witness to what was a momentous and occasionally tumultuous transition to peace.

### Intimidation across phone networks during the 2009 elections

During the March 2009 Aceh legislative elections, one of us (JHG) worked as an election observer with an international NGO. As pairs of observers moved from one town to the next, our contact information travelled through election stakeholder networks, and we soon found it difficult to accommodate, much less sort out and make sense of, the barrage of data that people sent us via SMS, frequently from unknown sources. A few examples recall the atmosphere of fear that voters, candidates, officials, and other election stakeholders conveyed to us:

YOU CAN SEND OUR BROTHER TO JAIL, BUT I WILL SEND YOU, COMMISSIONER, TO THE GATES OF HELL. GO AHEAD, ENJOY YOUR LIFE WITH YOUR WIFE AND CHILDREN, ONLY A FEW MORE MOMENTS REMAIN. [SENT TO THE HEAD OF THE BENER MERIAH DISTRICT ELECTION COMMISSION, FORWARDED TO US.]

SIR, DO NOT RETURN SO FREQUENTLY TO YOUR HOME. WHEN YOU RETURN HOME, YOU'LL BE SHOT DEAD IMMEDIATELY. THIS IS VALID INFORMATION. WE HAVE THE WEAPONS NEAR SIMPANG MAMPLAM. [MESSAGE SENT TO A LOCAL PARTY CANDIDATE, FORWARDED TO US].

ON TUESDAY NIGHT AT AROUND 1:30AM, SIX OFFICERS FROM THE TNI BASE ARRIVED ON THREE MOTORBIKES, CARRYING THREE FIREARMS. THEN THEY TOLD US 'DO NOT VOTE FOR ACEH. IF YOU VOTE FOR ACEH IT MEANS YOU'RE INVITING WAR WITH US.'

THE TAMIANG POLICE CHIEF AND HIS MEN HAVE SURROUNDED THE HOME OF THE DISTRICT HEAD OF PARTAI ACEH, AND WE DON'T KNOW WHY. THE INTIMIDATION HERE IS SEVERE. PLEASE INVESTIGATE AND RESPOND.

GOOD EVENING, WE ARE VERY FEARFUL OF THE TNI AND THE POLICE WHO HAVE BEEN ROAMING ABOUT. AT NIGHT, THEY ARE EVERYWHERE LIKE OWLS, BUT IN THE DAYTIME THEY DO NOT APPEAR. WE ASK THAT YOU WILL PUBLICISE THIS INFORMATION IN THE INTERNATIONAL NEWS, THAT THE PEOPLE OF ACEH ARE AFRAID OF THE TNI AND THE POLICE. PLEASE DO NOT SHARE MY PHONE NUMBER WITH ANYONE. THANK YOU.

These messages are anecdotal examples of overlapping individual and group communication strategies that were finding their way into the majority of mobile phones in Aceh. The volume of election-related SMS is not quantifiable, but our experience indicates that it was overwhelming. Intimidations by text message generally had their intended effect as they circulated in a setting of pre-election violence including arson, bombs, and targeted murders. Text messages reporting these violent acts (and threatening more to come) produced a sense of immediacy and proximity, amplifying and personalising among ordinary voters the effects of what were mostly isolated and parochial clashes between distant adversaries.<sup>68</sup> Rival candidates took to sleeping at different houses each night. They, and ordinary citizens, also ensured they were off the road before nightfall.

### Intimidation by SMS: a winning campaign strategy?

Just five days before the election, in the early evening on 4 April, JHG was meeting with a local NGO at a popular restaurant in the city of Langsa, and it was there that the atmospherics of terror turned into concrete reality when his interviewee received an urgent SMS:

TEUNGKU LEUBE, THE FORMER REGIONAL IGAM COMMANDER OF ARAMIAH LANGSA (JUST WEST OF LANGSA IN EAST ACEH) AND CURRENT HEAD OF THE PA SUB-DISTRICT OFFICE THERE, AGE 41, HAS BEEN SHOT DEAD BY UNKNOWN ASSAILANTS AT AROUND 7:20PM. HIS BODY HAS BEEN BROUGHT TO THE LANGSA PUBLIC HOSPITAL.

Moments later, similar messages arrived on JHG's phone as well, with PA officials requesting the election observers bear witness. Five minutes later JHG arrived at the hospital, where a large crowd already stood outside the emergency room. This was the sixth murder of a PA activist since February 2009.

Despite these terrors visited upon PA activists, on election day PA easily won nearly half the votes province-wide, allowing them to dominate the provincial assembly. For their part, during the

campaign PA had directed plenty of their own threats and intimidation, mostly toward the other five local political parties, ensuring only PA took part in organised local politics. In Aceh's subsequent 2013 gubernatorial and 2014 legislative elections, PA managed to unseat the enormously popular incumbent governor by creating an environment of pervasive threat not unlike what they had experienced in 2009. The number of violent incidents in the months immediately preceding the 2013 election correlated with the shift in public support to PA's ticket.<sup>69</sup> These former separatists threatened to return the province to war if they lost, and on that hopeful platform, they won. In the run-up to Aceh's 9 April 2014 legislative elections, the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence (Kontras) counted 48 cases of election-related violence from January to March, including murder. In both elections, SMS threats served as force multipliers for numerous targeted killings and bombings: intimations in their arrival on an uncounted and unsolicited number of mobile phones that no one was safe from such outcomes.

### Conclusions

Mobile technologies have been as thoroughly embraced by ex-insurgent thugs, religious extremists, and other 'uncivil' societal forces as they have by Kenyan housewives, Tanzanian cattle traders and Indonesian electoral quick-count monitors. A decade ago in Indonesian Papua, when select military units wished to clear Jayapura's evening streets, they would circulate rumours of vampires killing children in major towns. These actors learned that SMS cheaply and efficiently cultivate and expand zones of insecurity; the last decade has shown the nefarious embrace of this seemingly innocuous tool.

One counter-response from peace activists includes the development of 'early warning, early response' methodologies with ICT elements, often using the same mobile technologies first employed by spoilers in pursuit of more violent ends. International Crisis Group has reported on a loosely organised group, the 'peace provocateurs,' that responded to re-emergent sectarian violence in Ambon, where partisans have long relied upon media technologies to amplify the atmospherics of insecurity. The peace provocateurs now respond with the same tools, bringing their mobile phones to trouble spots to check rumours, then send back information and photos to a point

<sup>68</sup> On immediacy and proximity, see: Grayman, J. H. (2014). Rapid response: Email, immediacy, and medical humanitarianism in Aceh, Indonesia. *Social Science & Medicine*. In press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.04.024>. [Accessed 1 Sept. 2014].

<sup>69</sup> Anderson, B. (2013). Gangster, ideologue, martyr: The posthumous reinvention of Teungku Badruddin and the nature of the Free Aceh Movement. *Conflict, Security & Development*. 13 (1), p. 53.

person who broadcasts updates to journalists and the wider public via SMS.<sup>70</sup> This strategy, however, is a reactive solution, a stop-gap measure always one step behind potential spoilers.

Our experiences with these proliferating mobile technologies throughout the past decade in Aceh and elsewhere in Indonesia have led us to consider their security implications for aid and development projects. Text messages are now the first medium of choice in threatening and extorting not just stakeholders in local elections, but also aid projects and staff involved in the broad milieu of conflict recovery efforts.

The phenomenon of SMS-driven threats and rumours does not generally interfere with the sharing of genuine security information amongst security planners. As disseminators of rumour or threat, they are as common in deteriorating environments as confetti (a better comparison may be the chaff that disrupts flight radar), and reacting to them all is neither necessary nor possible: JHG's experience shows that they can contain relevant information, which is to be noted, but not responded to unless particularly rich in plausible detail. The overall security environment influenced how affected people made personal security decisions: political and ex-insurgent notables changed their travel and accommodation patterns in response to this, not driving on the same routes frequently, even relocating temporarily to safer and less-known locations, sometimes away from their families, or ensuring a security presence in their homes. Threatening SMSs generally served as symptoms of the environment, rather than anything actionable in themselves.

The vast majority of threatening SMSs that BA received while he managed dozens of stabilisation and reintegration projects in Aceh did not escalate beyond his phone and ended with the delete button. Only on three occasions in 3.5 years did SMS threats eventually lead to actual violence. Ease of delivery and the ability to change numbers suggests that these threats should not be taken as seriously as traditional ones (see Sambuli and Awori, pp. 27-31). But security managers should establish protocols for this medium: logging messages and numbers used, with particular attention to any personal information directed at individuals. Non-specific threats that contain no intimate information (such as addresses or license plate numbers or names of children or spouses, for example) should be treated as anecdotal

measurements of the increasing volatility of a security environment, and it is that environment that security managers will react to, rather than the SMS. SMSs containing specific information, however, need to be reacted to, as do SMSs arriving on, for example, an individual's private number which they do not disseminate widely (implying the threat's origin is more intimately close to the individual).

Over-reaction to non-specific threats weakens project credibility in post-conflict contexts precisely because such threats are to be expected in the course of such work. Numerous NGOs in Aceh actually used the threat environment to declare *force majeure* on projects that were failing long before they received any SMS threats. The urge to respond to such SMSs also needs to be resisted, because generally a response indicates that the threat has made an impact, and exposes the respondent to more threats, and more manipulation.

In conclusion, SMS threats do not generally constitute threats in themselves. Their anonymity and ease of use allow them to take on the appearance of threats, but they generally only act as the connective tissue for a larger body of more obvious threats that persons and organisations can act against. With certain exceptions, they serve as indicators for insecurity, rather than the insecurity itself.

<sup>70</sup> International Crisis Group. (2012). Indonesia: Cautious Calm in Ambon. *Asia Briefing*, 133. 13 Feb. p. 2. Available from: <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/south-east-asia/indonesia/b133-indonesia-cautious-calm-in-ambon.aspx>. (Accessed 1 Sept. 2014). See also ICG's Asia Briefing 128, which first reports on the formation of the peace provocateurs.

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Cover photo: Mary Kiperus, community health worker, uses a mobile phone for reporting to the local nurse. Leparua village, Isiolo County, Kenya. February, 2014. © Christian Aid/Elizabeth Dalziel.



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