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Munawar Liza Zainal

Searching for tourists, funds and more support

Ati Nurbaiti

The Jakarta Post/Jakarta

Do come to Sabang — the beach and the seabed is beautiful. That's the welcoming invitation from a local diver, a witness to the wonders of just one of the dive sites around the Weh island on the archipelago's northern tip. The diver, Munawar Liza Zainal, also happens to be Sabang's mayor.

He has been in office for just six months, since winning the municipality polls in the first-ever direct provincial elections in Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam, which took place shortly before his 33rd birthday last December.

Munawar has already led a full life. He left his family to study at the famed Gontor *pesantren*, or Islamic boarding school, in East Java; studied religion at Cairo's Al Azhar University, while joining fellow student activists in the last years of the Soeharto era — and getting recruited into the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

He linked up with the rest of Aceh's diaspora in several countries, sought refuge while studying in Thailand, spent time with other GAM activists in Sweden, e-mailed press releases to the media as GAM's deputy spokesman during the last military operations — before joining negotiators in cold Helsinki, Finland. This resulted in the historic memorandum of understanding which ended decades of war in Indonesia's northern province.

He was also involved in the Acehnese students' SIRA organization, which together with GAM fielded several independent candidates in the direct local polls.

Shortly after being installed as mayor Munawar managed to wed his

fiance of seven years — “she studied law as she was afraid I might get caught!” he said with a laugh. Maybe he was joking — but a free lawyer would have been quite handy.

And now as mayor (“I'm a government person now!”) the stout Munawar faces a much heavier task. He expressed frustration when addressing recent talks on peace agreements in Singapore — one reason is that he's not as powerful as he thinks.

He shows a copy of the draft government regulation needed to implement the law on Aceh governance. Former GAM figures have complained the law violates the memorandum of understanding — particularly because the requirement on consensus regarding new regulations affecting Aceh had been changed to only “consultation” between the central government and provincial lawmakers and the local government.

Another issue getting on Munawar's nerves is all the foreign assistance in Aceh, mostly available only for victims of the devastating tsunami in December 2004.

“Even if someone is dying in front of them they won't help,” he told a discussion in Singapore hosted by the Asia Europe Foundation.

As things now stand Sabang's mayor must confront several things all at once, just like Governor Irwandi Yusuf. Thankfully he can claim, he says with a smile, “200 percent” support from the Golkar-dominated local legislative body.

But he must deliver fast; although Sabang was not the worst hit area by the tsunami, the fishing communities urgently need money.

“We don't aim to make it look like Singapore, but to have Sabang

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MUNAWAR LIZA ZAINAL

become Sabang with its uniqueness, with a prosperous society," he said.

And he shares worries about the growing tension from unmet promises of cash. The memorandum of understanding guaranteed compensation to 3,000 former GAM fighters, and now former militia

who were "pro-Jakarta" are also entitled to compensation.

Experts say accommodating the needs of former civilian combatants on either side is a must. But former GAM figures like Munawar complain about "unfair equal compensation to pro-Jakarta civilian armed

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groups, whether their houses were burned down or not”.

The discussion in Singapore highlighted a long list of what seemed to be appalling flaws in the worldwide logbook on rebuilding post-conflict societies.

But Munawar has no time to lose heart; at the meeting he consulted with close associates who were advisers and former advisers of the Aceh Monitoring Mission.

Participants debated at length on what perfect peace agreements are made of — but Munawar is restless, jumping on to the immediate issues facing him.

He asked how to face a staff member suspected of corruption. “He’s protecting me while he doesn’t want the hassle with the military.”

He said this man was juggling budgetary posts and managing to pay the military their routine levy without adding a single account to the local budget.

The mayor could not get swift answers to all his questions; no one among the speakers had been a regent or mayor in charge of a community fresh out of a tsunami and a war zone at the same time.

Munawar himself was barraged by questions from a few Acehnese students studying in Singapore. “*Pak*, why is education in Indonesia so bad?” “*Pak*, why are teachers in Aceh of low quality?”

Here again he frets about “Jakarta intending to take back all the autonomy earlier promised to Aceh”.

With proper autonomy, he told the students, Aceh could write its own curricula, drawing on the national curricula while also taking what it could from Malaysia and Singapore — which are just across the sea from Sabang. This way, Acehnese stu-

dents would have better opportunities, he said.

Outsiders have always been more optimistic than those on the ground. Surely things can only go better after the tsunami and decades of violence.

Like Munawar, Pieter Feith, the former chief of the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM), stresses the need for continued support from Indonesia’s leadership for the Acehnese.

Not even all the support from the outside can help, without support from within, says Munawar.

“Everyone in Indonesia should support us,” he added.

Achieving milestones has come to be an understatement for Aceh when one considers all the loss in the province. This is why Munawar and others in Aceh get upset over not only the lack of visible support, but also the renegeing on promises and impressions of a former occupier finding it hard to let go.

“We demand that Jakarta meet its commitments,” he said.

Having appealed for more support, the mayor cannot wait.

There is so much juggling to do — figuring out, for instance, his room for maneuver while the central government still holds strong influence over determining the budget for Sabang.

Munawar’s days will continue to be packed — figuring out how Sabang can serve its residents as best as possible, engaging in business with neighbors, building the necessary infrastructure for tourists to enjoy the diving, the water caves and forests, and seeking the best opportunities for the young generation living just across from two developed Asian countries.

Meanwhile Jakarta, held back by past obsessions, continues to try to hold on to its old strings.