

BEHIND THE SYMBOLS OF DIALOGUE IN THE ACEH CONFLICT: SPECIAL AUTONOMY, REFERENDUM, INDEPENDENCE, OR WAR

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ABSTRAK

This study aims to examine the effectiveness of the dialogue approach as an instrument for resolving the Aceh conflict from 1976 to 2002, and to identify factors that hinder the achievement of sustainable peace. The armed conflict between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) has lasted for a very long time, leaving a profoundly traumatic impact on all levels of Acehese society. On the one hand, the people yearn for a peaceful and swift resolution to the conflict. On the other hand, anxiety over the possibility of retaliation, as has repeatedly occurred in the past, continues to haunt their lives. The novelty of this study lies in the descriptive content analysis approach combined with five integrative theoretical frameworks: Galtung's Positive Peace Theory, Rational Choice Theory, the concept of Asymmetric Autonomy, the Trust Deficit Theory, and Local Identity Theory. This approach yields a more comprehensive understanding of why each offered dialogue instrument often ends up being merely symbolic without producing real peace. Future handling of the Aceh conflict needs to be oriented towards honest and objective dialogue, inspired by a sincere moral commitment from both parties, in order to achieve a just and dignified resolution. The people of Aceh have reached a point of exhaustion from the various forms of suffering they have endured. Therefore, peace can only be achieved if all parties to the conflict are willing to sit together within the framework of a constructive and just political compromise.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Aceh Conflict, Dialogue, Special Autonomy, Referendum, Local Identity

INTRODUCTION

The Aceh conflict is one of the most complex political and security issues in modern Indonesian history. Tensions stemming from historical grievances, unequal distribution of natural resources, and the central government's neglect of Aceh's cultural

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identity have fueled armed resistance for more than two decades. The separatist movement led by Hasan Tiro, which began on December 4, 1976, plunged Aceh into a cycle of violence involving large-scale military operations by the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the Indonesian National Police (POLRI). In confronting this resistance, the central government tended to prioritize a repressive approach focused on security, while the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) remained steadfast in its primary demand: full independence from the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.

The signing of the Humanitarian Pause in Switzerland on May 12, 2000, offered hope of ending the prolonged cycle of violence. However, over time, this dialogue instrument often served as an arena for strengthening each party's position, rather than as a bridge to sustainable peace. Meanwhile, the people of Aceh continue to bear the physical burden, psychological stress, and economic uncertainty caused by the ongoing conflict. The failure of various dialogue efforts raises a fundamental question: why has every symbol of dialogue offered consistently failed to translate into concrete peace? This article seeks to answer this question by critically analyzing the dynamics surrounding conflict resolution efforts in Aceh between 1976 and 2002, encompassing policy dimensions, social psychology, and international comparisons.

The urgency of this study lies in the importance of a deeper understanding of the root causes of the failed dialogue in order to develop more effective and sustainable policy recommendations. This study is expected to contribute to the development of conflict resolution models in regions with similar characteristics, particularly those involving strong demands for local identity in the face of national integration interests. Thus, this study is relevant not only to the case study of Aceh, but also to international relations, peace studies, and public policy more broadly.

THEORITICAL REVIEW

A. Conflict Resolution and Positive Peace Theory (Johan Galtung)

Johan Galtung, widely recognized as a leading pioneer in the field of peace studies, made a crucial conceptual distinction between two types of peace. The first is negative peace, defined as the absence of direct physical violence. This can manifest itself in a ceasefire or a humanitarian pause, formally halting hostilities. In the context of the Aceh conflict in the 2000s, the agreed-upon Humanitarian Pause only achieved this level of negative peace, where the gunfire temporarily ceased, but the embers of tension remained smoldering beneath the surface.

The second is positive peace, which has a much broader and deeper scope. Positive peace encompasses efforts to eliminate structural violence, such as systematic economic inequality and institutionalized political discrimination, as well as cultural violence manifested in intergroup hatred and prejudice. Galtung emphasized that a genuine conflict resolution requires an authentic reconciliation process, namely the restoration of psychological relations between parties through honest recognition of historical truth and the comprehensive restoration of victims' rights.

Without the creation of positive peace, any form of dialogue held in Aceh will serve only as empty symbolism, masking old wounds that have never truly healed. Galtung's theoretical framework is highly relevant to understanding why the Humanitarian Pause, which only achieved a negative peace, was unable to permanently end the conflict. As long as the roots of structural and cultural violence remain entrenched, any peace agreement will be temporary and fragile.

B. Rational Choice Theory and Strategic Stalemate

Johan Galtung, widely recognized as a leading pioneer in peace studies, makes a crucial conceptual distinction between two typologies of peace. In the context of contemporary political science, rational choice theory views each actor involved in a conflict, in this case the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), as carefully calculating costs and benefits before taking any action. Dialogue will be considered a serious and meaningful arena only if both parties truly experience a condition known as a hurting stalemate, a painful impasse in which the costs of continuing the armed conflict far exceed the potential gains.

Conversely, if one party still believes victory through military means is achievable, then their involvement at the negotiating table is little more than a tactical maneuver. This phenomenon explains why the Humanitarian Pause initiated in Switzerland is often misused by both sides as a period of logistical consolidation and personnel recruitment. In rational choice logic, exploiting a lull to strengthen combat capacity while the opposing side is calm is considered a "profitable" move, even though ethically it clearly undermines the integrity and trust in the peace process.

This theory also helps explain the dynamics that occur beneath the surface of the negotiation process. Each proposal put forward in a dialogue forum actually reflects each party's strategic calculations regarding its bargaining position and long-term prospects, not simply a genuine drive for peace. Understanding this rational choice logic is crucial for designing appropriate incentive mechanisms to enable dialogue to develop into a truly productive process.

C. The Concept of Asymmetric Autonomy as an Instrument for Conflict Management

Johan Galtung, widely recognized as a leading pioneer in peace studies, provides a crucial conceptual distinction between two typologies of peace.

In the context of contemporary political science, rational choice theory considers each actor involved in a conflict. In this context, asymmetric autonomy is a constitutional design that grants broader rights and authorities to certain regions within a unitary state than are generally granted to other regions.

In this approach, autonomy is understood not only as a mechanism for transferring additional funds but also as a form of substantive recognition of a region's unique

identity, such as the implementation of Islamic law and official recognition of regional cultural symbols in Aceh.

Asymmetric autonomy is essentially designed to create a middle ground between two opposing poles: total integration, rejected by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), on the one hand, and complete independence, unacceptable to the Indonesian government, on the other.

The effectiveness of this approach depends heavily on the level of trust established between the two parties. If the autonomy offered is perceived solely as an instrument of political bribery without substantial economic sovereignty, this policy has the potential to trigger a wave of increasingly strong and widespread demands for referendums.

In an international comparison context, the asymmetric autonomy model has been successfully implemented in various parts of the world, such as in the Åland Islands in Finland, in Catalonia before the period of escalating demands for independence, and in several regions in Spain and Italy.

The success of this model is largely determined by the extent to which the granted authority is truly felt by the local community, not merely by its formal legal documents.

D. The Theory of Trust and Betrayal in Diplomacy

Protracted conflicts almost always result in a profound trust deficit between the warring parties. In modern diplomatic studies, achieving peace becomes particularly difficult when there is what is known as a commitment problem, a situation where one party lacks sufficient confidence that the other party will fulfill agreed commitments in the future.

In Aceh, the historical legacy of repeated broken promises, such as those during the Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII) rebellion, carries a particularly heavy historical burden. Every policy adopted by the central government is always greeted with deep skepticism by the Acehnese people, as bitter past experiences have shaped a collective awareness that promises are not always reliable. This theory helps explain why any offered token of dialogue is often suspected of being a trap or a cover for military operations.

To address this trust deficit, conflict resolution experts emphasize the importance of concrete, independently verifiable confidence-building measures. Without a credible verification mechanism and a neutral third party as a guarantee, any agreement will always be overshadowed by suspicions that the other party is plotting its next move behind the scenes.

E. Local Identity and Nationalism Theory

The Aceh conflict can also be productively analyzed through the perspective of identity theory. Acehese nationalism, which developed on the historical glory of the Aceh Darussalam Sultanate and the heroic spirit of resistance against Dutch colonialism, has created a powerful, profound collective identity that is difficult to negotiate solely through materialistic approaches. This identity did not emerge suddenly, but rather is the result of hundreds of years of historical experiences that have shaped the Acehese people's perspectives and feelings about themselves.

Identity theory explains why approaches based on economic incentives, such as the provision of autonomy funds, often fail to deliver the desired impact if not accompanied by efforts to restore the dignity of the Acehese people as a nation with intact and recognized cultural sovereignty. From this perspective, the Aceh conflict is not simply a matter of the unfair distribution of natural resources, but more fundamentally, a matter of recognition and respect for the identity of a community that feels its identity is threatened.

The synthesis of the five theoretical frameworks above provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of the Aceh conflict. Each theory illuminates a different aspect of the same problem, and only by considering all these dimensions together can we understand why solutions that appear partially logical are incapable of ending the conflict completely.

METHOD

This research adopts a qualitative approach with an emphasis on library research. This approach was chosen based on the characteristics of the research problem, which is historical and related to public policy. The necessary data is stored in written manuscripts, official reports, and scientific journal documents that are inaccessible through conventional field research. The research design used is descriptive interpretive content analysis, which not only summarizes the contents of documents superficially but also conducts in-depth interpretations of the meanings hidden behind the policy texts. For example, the phrase "Humanitarian Pause" actually carries far more complex political implications than simply a temporary halt to fighting, and the term "Special Autonomy" embodies deep debates regarding the boundaries of authority and the distribution of resources. The researcher attempts to reconstruct the reality of the Aceh conflict between 1976 and 2002 through the perspective of policies issued by the Indonesian government and the demands put forward by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

The data sources in this study are divided into two main categories. First, primary data derived from Tamarli's policy analysis manuscript published in *Mondial Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 1, and the Indonesian National Awakening Party (GAM). 3 of 2002. This document was chosen as the primary source because it was compiled during a critical period during the conflict, thus recording the dynamics of contemporary events in detail and authentically from the perspective of academics who lived through the situation. Second, secondary data includes the historical chronology of the Acehese struggle since

1976, the text of the Humanitarian Pause agreement signed in Switzerland on May 12, 2000, national and local print media coverage, and various relevant academic literature on conflict resolution and peace studies. Pengumpulan data dilakukan melalui teknik studi Systematic documentation and literature review focused on three main aspects: first, the chronology of military and political developments in Aceh from 1976 to 2002; second, the substance of the Special Autonomy policy and the evolving referendum discourse; and third, notes on the socio-economic impact of the conflict on civilian life.

Data analysis was conducted through four systematic stages based on Miles and Huberman's interactive analysis model. The first stage is data reduction, in which researchers select key information by focusing on central variables such as the roles of key figures, the military strategies of both parties, and the peace instruments implemented. The second stage is categorization, in which data are grouped into meaningful analytical clusters. The third stage is interpretation, in which data findings are critically linked to the established theoretical framework. The fourth stage is conclusion drawing, which involves developing a comprehensive synthesis of all the interpretations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. RESEARCH RESULT

The Failure of the Humanitarian Pause as an Instrument of Peace

The signing of the Humanitarian Pause on May 12, 2000, at Chateau Bavoiss, Switzerland, was supposed to be a historic moment to ease tensions in Aceh. During this process, the Indonesian government was represented by Ridwan Karim, while the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) sent Dr. Nashiruddin bin Ahmed. While the initial agreement did reduce the intensity of the conflict, a foundation of trust between the two parties was never established.

The central government, through the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the Indonesian National Police (POLRI), implemented the Operation Love Meunasah (OCM), but GAM interpreted this not as a genuine approach to the community but as a covert tool to systematically map out their power. Security forces accused GAM of using the pause to consolidate power, recruit new members, and extort local businesspeople.

As a result, instead of humanitarian aid reaching the people, both sides strengthened their fighting capacity. The Humanitarian Pause, which was supposed to be a bridge to peace, ultimately served only as an empty symbol that exacerbated mutual suspicion between the two sides..

B. Intellectual Tragedy and the Loss of Public Space

One of the darkest phases of the Aceh conflict was the loss of the lives of several prominent intellectuals who should have served as bridges between conflicting interests. The shooting that claimed the life of the Rector of IAIN Ar-Raniry, Prof. Safwan Idris,

became the most potent symbol of the demise of dialogue within academic circles. This incident was not only a personal tragedy, but also a systematic attack on civil society's ability to engage in the peace process.

Civil society—including politicians, businesspeople, community leaders, and intellectuals—no longer dared to openly express their aspirations for peace. Threats came from various directions, creating a tense atmosphere in which the Acehnese people were trapped in a state of persistent fear.

The loss of a safe public space for dialogue significantly impacted the prospects for peace. Without the presence of independent and credible civilian actors, the negotiation process became merely a matter for the military and political elites, each bringing their own sectoral interests to the negotiating table. The voices of ordinary people, who were most affected by the conflict, were not adequately represented.

C. The Dilemma of Special Autonomy versus Referendum

When military action proved ineffective in resolving the conflict and dialogue reached a deadlock, political discourse began to dominate public debate. The Indonesian government offered a solution in the form of Special Autonomy (Otsus), outlined in Law Number 18 of 2001 concerning Special Autonomy for the Province of Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam. Otsus was designed as the most expansive compromise possible without threatening the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), granting broad authority in the areas of religion, customs, and education, including the implementation of Islamic law.

However, on the other side, the Acehnese student movement launched a referendum demand with two contrasting options: complete independence or remaining part of the NKRI within the framework of special autonomy. For supporters of the referendum, Special Autonomy was nothing more than a ploy by Jakarta to maintain political control over Aceh while continuing to extract its natural resource wealth without commensurate returns.

For the central government, fresh from the loss of Timor-Leste in the 1999 referendum, the option of a referendum for Aceh was simply unconsidered. This precedent raised concerns that allowing a referendum in Aceh would open a Pandora's box for other regions. This deadlock reflects a very wide gap in perception between the two parties.

B. DISCUSSION

A. Social and Psychological Dimensions of Prolonged Conflict

Twenty-six years of armed conflict since 1976 have produced what could be called a "generational wound"—a collective trauma passed down from one generation to the next through narratives of violence, experiences of loss, and persistent uncertainty.

Acehnese children have grown up in the shadow of violence, witnessing events far beyond their comprehension. Women and mothers bear a double burden: the loss of family members in the conflict and the threat of gender-based violence.

The paralysis of the economy has destroyed the existing social fabric. Investment has stalled, infrastructure has been neglected, and skilled workers have fled Aceh for safety elsewhere. The cycle of poverty has deepened, and the Acehnese people have reached a point of exhaustion from the daily suffering they endure.

The psychological dimension of this protracted conflict is often overlooked in policy analyses that focus more on the military and political aspects. Yet, community psychological recovery is a crucial prerequisite for achieving sustainable peace. Without a comprehensive trauma recovery program, a community that has long lived in fear will find it extremely difficult to regain trust in any peace process.

B. International Comparison and the Commonwealth Model

In seeking an alternative model for resolving the conflict in Aceh, a comparative approach emerged, drawing on the relationship between the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth of Nations for inspiration. This model provides perspective on how two distinct entities can maintain formal ties while granting significant autonomy to each party.

This approach is considered more effective than imposing a centralized system of government that never gains legitimacy from local communities. The key principle is dignified equality between the central government and the regions, where regions are not treated as subordinate entities. Political elites are advised to take concrete actions that reflect respect for local dignity and sovereignty, rather than simply issuing rhetorical statements.

Northern Ireland's experience with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement provides a valuable lesson: a sustainable conflict resolution requires a combination of substantial political compromise, credible security guarantees, and a comprehensive community reconciliation program. While no single formula is universally applicable, these basic elements appear to be universal.

C. Institutional Failure and Synthesis of Discussion

The internal dynamics of the Jakarta bureaucracy also played a significant role in hindering conflict resolution. When the Humanitarian Pause failed to produce the expected progress, internal tensions began to become apparent within the Indonesian government. The dismissal of Deputy TNI Commander Fahrurrazi and the Chief of the

Indonesian National Police indicated serious disagreements within the military elite regarding the policy direction to be taken.

This internal conflict reflected the government's fundamental dilemma: continuing dialogue at the risk of legitimizing GAM, or resuming military operations at the risk of international condemnation and civilian suffering. The decision to strengthen the military presence directly paralyzed economic activity and further strengthened GAM's argument that joining Indonesia would only harm the Acehese people.

Analyzing all of the above, the failure of dialogue in the Aceh conflict was not caused by a single factor, but rather by a complex configuration of interconnected factors. The trust deficit, the logic of rational choice, and the inability to achieve a positive level of peace intertwined, creating a structural trap that was difficult to resolve. Most fundamentally, this conflict had an identity dimension that could not be reduced to mere economic or security issues. Any solution that ignores this dimension will never truly end the conflict.

Ultimately, the Aceh conflict was successfully resolved through the Helsinki Agreement in 2005—after the December 2004 tsunami created a truly hurting stalemate for both parties—confirming the prediction of rational choice theory that productive dialogue can only occur when the costs of conflict are perceived as too great by all parties.

CONCLUSION

Based on the comprehensive analysis presented, several key conclusions can be drawn. First, the military approach used to handle the Aceh conflict has proven incapable of providing a comprehensive and meaningful solution. History clearly demonstrates that no military force, however large, can end resistance stemming from deep-seated identity beliefs and prolonged experiences of injustice.

Second, various attempts at dialogue, including the Humanitarian Pause in 2000, have failed to create sustainable peace because they have failed to transcend the level of negative peace. Unless the roots of structural violence, such as economic inequality, political discrimination, and the neglect of cultural identity, are seriously addressed, any agreement reached will be temporary.

Third, the lack of trust stemming from the accumulation of historical betrayals is a fundamental obstacle that must be overcome before productive dialogue can take place. A credible verification mechanism and the involvement of a neutral third party are non-negotiable requirements.

Fourth, a genuine resolution of the Aceh conflict requires substantial recognition of the identity and dignity of the Acehese people, not merely technical compromises regarding the distribution of power and natural resources. True peace can only be achieved if all parties involved are willing to sit together within the framework of constructive political compromise, based on sincerity born of the realization that

continuing the conflict benefits no one. The people of Aceh, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) fighters, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) and the Indonesian National Police (POLRI), and the entire Indonesian nation have the right to dignified peace.

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