Conflict dynamics among former elites of the Free Aceh Movement after the Helsinki agreement: A case study of regional head elections in Aceh

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Abstract
This research investigates the conflict dynamics between former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) elites in the context of post-MoU Helsinki local elections in Aceh. The focus is to provide a comprehensive view of Aceh's post-peace political dynamics and its contribution to developing policies to strengthen political stability and reconciliation in the region. The research uses an exploratory case study approach with primary data from in-depth interviews and participatory observation of former GAM elites, local politicians, conflict observers, and community leaders. Secondary data sources included Aceh's historical literature, treaty documents, and academic journal articles. Analysis was conducted inductively to conclude. The Helsinki Peace Agreement was essential in ending the armed conflict between GAM and the Indonesian government. Besides mandating the demobilization and reintegration of former GAM members through the Aceh Transitional Committee (KPA), the agreement also paved the way for GAM's transformation into a legitimate political force with the formation of Partai Aceh. The results also show that GAM's transformation has had a significant positive impact on Aceh's political stability and Aceh's integration into the framework of the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia. However, challenges such as internal dissent and people's expectations for further autonomy show that the journey toward sustainable peace is complex and requires a strong commitment from all parties concerned.

Keywords: conflict, Free Aceh Movement, MoU Helsinki, politics, Regional Head Election

Public Interest Statement

This study retains the critical points while condensing the information into a more concise and scientifically grounded format. The decades-long conflict in Aceh has been shaped by historical grievances and aspirations for autonomy deeply rooted in Acehnese identity. The 2005 Helsinki Agreement marked a watershed moment that ceased hostilities and initiated a peace effort that included special autonomy and the integration of former combatants. Post-peace elections in 2006, 2012, and 2017 highlighted the challenges of peacebuilding and democratic governance, which exacerbated internal divisions, economic competition, and external influences. Efforts such as the Aceh Transitional Committee and Partai Aceh aim to reintegrate former combatants but face obstacles such as power struggles and ethnic tensions. Sustainable peace and development in Aceh requires strengthening democratic institutions and transparency and addressing socio-economic disparities. To build a prosperous future, all stakeholders, communities, leaders, civil society, and government must prioritize inclusive governance that respects Aceh's unique identity.

Introduction

A separatist movement is a political movement carried out by a group or organization that demands independence or secession from a country or region that they consider unfair or does not meet their needs, including militant, political, or social movements (Pratiwi, 2017). One example of a separatist movement in Indonesia is the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) is a separatist movement founded in Aceh, Indonesia, in 1976 by Hasan di Tiro to establish an independent state separate from Indonesia, based on the claim that Aceh has the right to self-determination due to its history as an independent sultanate before joining Indonesia. The existence of this Movement was triggered by the Acehnese people's dissatisfaction with the Indonesian central government and their opposition to acts of injustice in the resource sector and economic equality. This Movement was influenced by several factors, namely social factors and political factors. In the end, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) has gone through several phases, including the armed struggle phase and the transformation phase to political struggle after the signing of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2005 (Permanasari, 2019). GAM's transformation was characterized by a change in the Movement pattern from armed to political. GAM's struggle in the political realm is also characterized by differences in nationalism built by former GAM combatants when they became GAM and former GAM combatants (Maisarah & Hasan, 2019).

The Helsinki Agreement on GAM has several points of agreement, namely the establishment of a more autonomous Aceh government, protection of human rights, providing amnesty and reintegration to GAM fighters, creating security for Aceh, and supervision (Muslim et al., 2022). The Helsinki Agreement was expected to help end the three-decade conflict between Aceh and the Indonesian government and bring security and stability to the Aceh region. After the Movement was abolished, several obstacles affected the stability of the Aceh government, including the political Movement in Aceh. With special international attention, the European Union and other ASEAN countries established the Aceh Monitoring Mission (AMM) to monitor the implementation of the Helsinki Agreement, which included the cessation of hostilities, demobilization and reintegration of GAM members, and the implementation of political reforms in Aceh. In the context of local elections, the AMM has played a role in changing contradictory structures by transforming the culture of violence into a culture of peace, thus enabling peaceful and well-run elections (Safriadi, 2022). In addition, the participation of the former GAM diaspora in politics has become a representation of GAM's role in the process of winning the Aceh Party in the 2009 Legislative Election, which shows the political dynamics in Aceh by the mission of peace and continuing the political struggle (Athaillah, 2015). However, there are other

impacts created by regional head candidates who come from former GAM combatants, causing internal conflict.

After the Helsinki Agreement, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was transformed from an armed movement to a political entity in Aceh, which faced several complex conflicts in local elections. The rivalry between former GAM leaders such as Muzakir Manaf and Zaini Abdullah reflected fierce political competition. At the same time, internal fragmentation within GAM resulted in conflicts based on different political visions and strategies. In addition, conflicts arose from the struggle for economic interests and power in local government and dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Helsinki Agreement, which affected the reintegration of former combatants. Support from different mass bases and campaign strategies have also been a source of tension in building post-conflict political stability in Aceh.

Based on the explanation above, researchers analyzed previous research that explained the conflict between former GAM elites in regional head elections. After signing the Helsinki Agreement between the Government of Indonesia and GAM, the 2006 Aceh regional elections experienced an increase in Acehnese political participation. However, its implementation had several problems (Junaidi et al., 2022). The existence of Partai Aceh as a local political force in post-peace elections was affected by a significant decline in voter turnout and loss of seats in the House of Representatives as well as executive power in several regions, due to internal party conflicts and loss of cadres (Usman, 2021). In addition, there has been a decline in Acehnese political participation and several challenges in the conflict resolution process (Usman, 2021).

Building on the previous explanation, this research investigates the conflict between former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) elites in the context of post-Helsinki local elections in Aceh. The research focuses on analyzing the dynamics of political competition between former GAM leaders such as Muzakir Manaf and Zaini Abdullah, as well as exploring the internal fragmentation within GAM that affects their political strategies and visions. In addition, the research also examines the factors that led to dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Helsinki Accords, including challenges in the reintegration of former combatants and competition for economic power in local government. By deepening the understanding of this conflict, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive view of the post-peace political dynamics in Aceh and contribute to developing policies to strengthen political stability and reconciliation in the region.

Literature Review

Based on the previous explanation, the researcher would like to look at previous research related to political conflict. Political elites compete for power based on identity, and identity groups emerge at the subnational level to defend these identities, giving rise to political relevance and demands (Iyekekpolo, 2018). Political elites who have significant influence can influence people spontaneously and make them obey political elites (Husen, 2016). Conflicts between political elites cause disruption of the bureaucracy, protracted regional budgets, politicization of the bureaucracy, and disrupted public services (Irtanto, 2018). This conflict has a significant impact on the order of society, causing stagnation in democracy (Ayoob & Lussier, 2020). In elections, some factors can trigger conflict, such as the absence of dialog and opposition participation (Jovanović & Simić, 2023). Frequent voter fraud and patronage schemes can distort election results (Kalemaj & Pandelejmoni, 2024). In addition, societies alienate voters due to elected officials' failure to fulfill election promises, electoral fraud, and violence (Igiebor, 2023). In societies with a history of ethnic divisions, horizontal disparities can trigger conflict (Kniss, 2010).

The existence of different regions and the involvement of community leaders can lead to

different interests and goals, which can influence political conflict (Romlah, 2017). The strength of the presidential system can cause party simplification patterns to be minimal and create additional electoral districts (DAPIL) (Sasadara, 2024). One factor that can increase conflict in regional elections is decentralization, which can change the regional power structure and application of values (Prasiasa, 2020; Faridhi, 2017). In addition, total power over a region given to manage regional elections can lead to conflict and the involvement of civil apparatus in the election process (Sabir, 2023). Therefore, decentralization requires better representation and control in the election process (Suwardi, 2023). However, decentralized governance structures allow local communities to participate more effectively in decision-making, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability (Boex et al., 2010).

The region's urgent need for post-conflict reconstruction often precedes human rights and democratic principles. Local political culture and socio-economic conditions can hinder democratic consolidation, making it difficult to organize elections that are genuinely representative of the population (Ivanov, 2010). The usual solution is to establish power-sharing and unity, but this can be more complicated and only sometimes (Miti et al., 2013). People in post-conflict areas generally lack political participation due to societal divisions (Maksum, 2006). Thus, conflict resolution is needed to create political stability in the area. Conflict resolution can be resolved through mediation and adjudication of conflicting parties (Hardiansyah et al., 2021). Revitalization of nationalist values can be done through socialization and community participation in the life of the nation and state (Rahman & Fakhrurrazi, 2016). Conflict resolution can be done by strengthening democracy and creating a transparent and accountable government (). The involvement of political parties to maintain economic stability and growth is needed to create a relatively stable political environment (Khudoley, 2023). The post-conflict associative process requires an active role of the civil apparatus in restoring security and stability in the region (Susilo et al., 2021). What can be done is to improve the quality of public services for the community (Badarudin & Eni, 2019). Practical public relations activities can help restore the image and rebuild public trust in the government or organizations involved in the conflict (Kauzya, 2021).

Methods

This research utilizes qualitative research methodology, specifically adopting an exploratory case study approach. This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study method to explore the conflict between former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) elites after the Helsinki MoU. This approach was chosen to investigate and understand phenomena by collecting and analyzing data inductively, with the aim of answering the research questions and interpreting the significance of the findings (Creswell, 2014). Primary data was collected through in-depth interviews with key informants such as former GAM elites, local politicians, conflict observers and Acehnese community leaders. These interviews were conducted to obtain first-hand views and experiences on the history of the conflict, the causes of the conflict, the dynamics that occurred, and the resolution efforts that have been made.

Participatory observation was also used to deepen situational understanding of the conflict under study. In addition, secondary data was obtained from relevant literature such as Aceh history books, treaty documents, and articles from relevant academic journals. These secondary data sources were accessed through various digital platforms and physical libraries, including Elsevier, ProQuest, and the Garuda portal. Data analysis was conducted inductively, starting with data condensation to select, focus and simplify information from various sources that had been collected. The next step is data display which organizes information to be arranged in accordance with the research objectives, as well as drawing conclusions and verification to interpret patterns, causal relationships, and propositions that arise from the processed data. Data validity is strengthened by triangulation techniques, namely

comparing and checking the truth of data from different sources and methods. By using a combination of methods, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of conflict between former GAM elites in Aceh, with a focus on analyzing the causes of conflict, conflict anatomy, and resolution efforts that have been made.

Results and Discussion

History and Conflict from the Beginning of Independence to the Emergence of the Free Aceh Movement

Based on the history of conflict in Aceh, it can be concluded that the struggle of the Acehnese people to maintain their identity and rights has been going on since the colonial period until the reform era. Some of the main factors that triggered this conflict were dissatisfaction with central government policies that were considered to ignore the aspirations and privileges of the Acehnese people and social and political injustices experienced by the Acehnese people. During the Dutch colonial period, the Acehnese resistance was triggered by changes to the Treaty of London that allowed the Dutch to control Aceh, triggering a protracted war from 1873 to 1942. During the Japanese occupation, Acehnese support for the Japanese was a form of resistance to the Dutch. After Indonesian independence, Aceh's support for the central government became disillusioned when Aceh's privilege to implement Islamic Sharia was removed, and Aceh was merged with North Sumatra in 1950.

Resistance in the independence era began with the Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII) rebellion led by Teungku Mohammad Daud Beureueh in 1953. The rebellion lasted until 1962 and ended with negotiations that granted Aceh special status in religious affairs, common law, and education in 1959. In 1976, Teungku Dr. Hasan Muhammad di Tiro declared the formation of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) to separate Aceh from Indonesia. The conflict was exacerbated by the government's policy of declaring Aceh a Military Operation Area (DOM) in 1989, which resulted in widespread human rights violations. After the fall of the Soeharto regime in 1998, efforts to achieve peace continued despite the growing conflict.

The tsunami that hit Aceh in December 2004 created momentum for both sides to achieve peace. Negotiations mediated by the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) in Helsinki, Finland, resulted in the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on August 15, 2005. This agreement ended nearly three decades of armed conflict, granted Aceh special autonomy status, and began the reintegration process for GAM members. In conclusion, the conflict in Aceh resulted from dissatisfaction with unfair central government policies as well as the internal dynamics of Acehnese society. The 2005 Helsinki Agreement demonstrated the importance of dialogue and compromise in resolving armed conflict and building sustainable peace. The Acehnese people's long struggle finally paid off by achieving peace and stability through peace negotiations and granting special autonomy status.

The Ideology and Evolution of the Free Aceh Movement: Historical Sovereignty, Ethnonationalism, and Strategic Adaptation

The ideology of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) centers on the national liberation of Aceh from Jakarta's control. It views its struggle as a continuation of Aceh's anti-colonial rebellion against the Dutch invasion of 1873. GAM argues that Aceh did not voluntarily join Indonesia in 1945 and maintains that Aceh is an internationally recognized independent state, as evidenced by historic treaties such as the Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824. GAM declared independence in 1976, claiming that the transfer of sovereignty from the Netherlands to Indonesia was illegitimate. They argued that Aceh was a sovereign political entity with international recognition before Indonesia was established, and the Dutch had no right to hand Aceh over to Indonesia, as Aceh had never been a Dutch colony, either de facto or de jure.

In addition, GAM emphasized that the Acehnese people were not consulted about joining Indonesia, which was a violation of their right to self-determination.

Acehnese ethnonationalism is characterized by a focus on blood, religion, and ethnicity, emphasizing Aceh's distinct identity through language, culture, and history. Hasan Tiro, a key figure in this Movement, sought to revive Aceh's historical sovereignty and manage its natural resources independently. Initially, Tiro wanted Aceh to be part of the Indonesian federation, but after failing to achieve this, he turned to ethno-regionalism and separatism. Tiro implemented measures such as creating an Aceh-specific calendar and commemorating local historical events to strengthen Aceh's identity. Acehnese nationalism, according to Tiro, was a means to achieve independence, wealth, and prosperity for Aceh, who had faced economic exploitation and political marginalization under Indonesian rule.

The relationship between GAM and Islam has evolved. Initially, GAM's independence proclamation was secular, although it occasionally referred to the Quran. Over time, the vision of an independent Aceh included elements of reconstructing an Islamic state, but the main focus remained on resistance to Javanese colonialism. Islam in GAM's ideology serves more as a cultural and identity marker than a primary political aspiration. The Movement's approach to Sharia varied, with some commanders implementing it in their areas. Islam serves to unify Aceh's various tribes and distinguish them from the Javanese, providing a message of justice and equality that resonates with those in conflict. GAM's ambivalent attitude towards Islam allowed it to maintain internal unity despite differing views on the role of religion.

GAM's initial ideology included anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist elements, criticizing foreign exploitation and the United States' support for Soeharto. However, in the post-DOM (Military Operation Area) period, GAM shifted to using human rights language, accusing companies such as ExxonMobil of involvement in human rights abuses. Global and local developments, including the end of the Cold War and democratization in Indonesia, influenced this change. East Timor's independence demonstrated the effectiveness of human rights, democracy, and referendums in national liberation. As a result, GAM adapted to these changes by forming alliances with NGOs and broadening its rationale for Aceh's independence.

The 2002 Stavanger Declaration marked a significant shift in GAM's vision, recognizing an independent and democratic Aceh rather than a return to the sultanate. The declaration emphasized the importance of allowing the Acehnese people to determine the shape of their state after achieving independence. Overall, GAM's ideology is rooted in historical claims to sovereignty, ethnonationalism, and a distinct Acehnese identity, with a varying emphasis on Islam. Over time, GAM has adapted its strategy to global changes, focusing on human rights and democracy, influenced by the broader context of Indonesian and international politics.

The success of the Helsinki Agreement

The successful negotiation of the Helsinki MoU in 2005 between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was facilitated by several important factors. First, the tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean in December 2004 played an essential role by shifting priorities to humanitarian aid and reconstruction in Aceh. This humanitarian crisis created an opportune moment for peace talks, as both sides recognized the urgent need for stability and recovery amid widespread destruction. Before the tsunami, GAM had been significantly weakened by the sustained military offensive initiated by President Megawati Sukarnoputri in October 2003. Mr. Wiratmadinata, an observer of the Aceh conflict, also stated this:

"Actually, when the Helsinki MoU took place GAM was already pressed, they were no longer

able to fight, I got information from them (GAM), just make peace, we are bored, we are no longer able to fight, we have no power, indeed if they are eliminated by the TNI it will only take a short time, especially after the tsunami." (Wiratmadinata, 2022).

This integrated operation drastically reduced GAM's military capabilities, making the Movement more inclined towards negotiations. During the tsunami, GAM's weakened position and the enormous humanitarian needs in Aceh created an environment conducive to peace negotiations. Second, the personal and familial approach was critical in building trust among the negotiators. Indonesian negotiator Farid Husein used a soft power strategy, building personal relationships with GAM leaders and their families. This humanitarian approach, which included offering medical assistance to key GAM figures, demonstrated the government's sincerity in pursuing peace. Vice President Jusuf Kalla also played an essential role through personal diplomacy, utilizing his business acumen to deal directly with GAM leaders. In addition, negotiations were conducted informally in Helsinki, unlike previous formal efforts, to avoid legal implications and facilitate smoother communication.

Finland's Crisis Management Initiative (CMI), led by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, mediated the negotiations with tacit approval rather than formal authorization, relying on verbal requests and personal approaches. This informal framework allowed for greater flexibility and trust-building between the Indonesian government and GAM, culminating in the signing of the Helsinki MoU on August 15, 2005. The Helsinki MoU provided a comprehensive strategy for peace, which included economic and political incentives such as land concessions and local political participation in Aceh. It set clear deadlines for demobilizing GAM forces and withdrawing government troops, reflecting lessons learned from previous failed agreements. The agreement ended three decades of conflict and laid the foundation for Aceh's autonomous government and the integration of former GAM members into mainstream society. Despite its challenges, the Helsinki MoU was an important milestone towards lasting peace and development in Aceh, marking a transformative shift in the socio-political landscape of the region.

The Success of the Helsinki Agreement Dynamics of Post-Conflict Local Elections of the Free Aceh Movement

The 2006 local elections in Aceh marked a significant transition to democratic governance following the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding. These elections were significant because they allowed for the direct election of local leaders, including the governor and deputy governor, amidst post-conflict challenges. Major factions emerged within the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), reflecting internal divisions between older exiles and younger combatants.

GAM-aligned candidates, notably Irwandi Yusuf and Muhammad Nazar, emerged victorious despite predictions favoring candidates backed by national parties. Their success signaled a shift in Aceh's political landscape, challenging established political norms dominated by Jakarta-centered parties. The victory also symbolized GAM's integration into the Acehnese political mainstream, influencing subsequent elections and governance dynamics. Post-election, internal disputes within GAM over leadership and ideological symbols continued, underscoring the complexity of Aceh's political reform. The peaceful conduct of the elections demonstrated local commitment to stability and the democratic process despite earlier fears of violence. Overall, the 2006 elections in Aceh not only consolidated GAM's political influence but also set a precedent for regional autonomy and the role of former conflict actors in post-conflict societies.

The Aceh conflict, characterized by the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) seeking independence from

Indonesia, culminated in the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2005. This agreement brought about significant transformations within GAM, most notably by establishing a transitional organization: Aceh Transitional Committee (KPA) and Partai Aceh. Following the Helsinki MoU, GAM established the KPA to oversee the reintegration of former combatants into civilian life. Structurally mirroring GAM's military command, the KPA ensured the social and political role of ex-combatants in contrast to their previous armed activities. This transition was crucial in maintaining GAM's organizational integrity while complying with the terms of demilitarization.

Politically, GAM formed Partai Aceh to participate in local governance, which aligned with Acehnese's aspirations for autonomy from Indonesia. This move, initially mooted due to national concerns over separatism, was made possible by Law No. 11/2006, which regulates local parties in Aceh. Despite challenges from Jakarta and legal uncertainty, Partai Aceh emerged as a platform for GAM's political engagement and representation. Mr. Wiratmadinata, an observer of the Aceh conflict, stated this:

> *"it is the dynamics of the process of their transformation or reintegration into the unitary state of Indonesia but on the other hand I consider that the scheme of moderation of the resistance of the Free Aceh Movement in the process of reintegration with Indonesia is successful. so the scheme is successful so the scheme is to make them part of the process, to be a subject, to make them a player in this country (Aceh)." (Wiratmadinata, 2022)*

The formation of local parties is part of the transformation and reintegration of GAM into NKRI. The formation of these entities reflected GAM's strategic shift from armed struggle to political participation, underscoring their acceptance of autonomy within the framework of the unitary state of Indonesia. This evolution, guided by democratic principles and negotiated settlements, aims to integrate former rebels into mainstream governance while addressing local grievances. However, challenges remain, including legal disputes and opposition from national political elites, highlighting the ongoing tension between central control and regional autonomy aspirations. Despite these challenges, establishing the KPA and Partai Aceh was essential to peacebuilding and democratic consolidation in Aceh, bridging the gap between conflict resolution and governance reform. The post-conflict transformation in Aceh demonstrates a complex interaction between peace negotiations, institutional restructuring, and political evolution, illustrating a dynamic transition process from conflict to sustainable peace within a democratic framework.

As a case in point, the 2012 local elections in Aceh were characterized by significant political and social tensions, in contrast to the relatively peaceful 2006 elections. The elections were contentious due to the emergence of two main factions: one led by Irwandi Yusuf and another led by Partai Aceh, formerly known as the Free Aceh Movement. Irwandi Yusuf, who ran independently, challenged the dominance of the Aceh Party, leading to bitter electoral disputes and horizontal conflict. The roots of the conflict lay in Irwandi Yusuf's independent candidacy, which was opposed by Partai Aceh, who considered him and his supporters traitors to GAM's cause. This animosity escalated into violence, including attacks, arson, and even loss of life, underscoring the deep divisions within Acehnese society over political leadership.

Table 1. Vote Results for the 2012 Governor and Deputy Governor Election

Candidate	Number of Votes	Percentage (%)
Ahmad Tajuddin- Teuku Suriansya	79.330	3.33
Irwandi Yusuf- Muhyan Yunan	694.515	29.18

Dami M. Daud- Ahmad Fauzi	96.767	4.07
Muhammad Nazar- Nova Iriansyah	182.079	7.65
Zaini Abdullah-Muzakir Manaf	1.327.695	55.78
Ahmad Tajuddin-Teuku Suriansya	79.330	3.33
Irwandi Yusuf-Muhyan Yunan	694.515	29.18
Total Valid Votes	2.380.386	96.87
Total Invalid Votes	76.810	3.13
Total Valid and Invalid Votes	2.457.196	
Registered Voters	3.244.729	

Source: Anfrel.org, 2012

Delays marred the election process, with the election postponed several times due to legal disputes over the eligibility of independent candidates such as Irwandi Yusuf. The intervention of the Constitutional Court allowed independent candidates to participate, a decision vehemently opposed by Partai Aceh, which argued that it contradicted the Helsinki Agreement that ended the Aceh conflict. In the election, Zaini Abdullah and Muzakir Manaf of the Aceh Party emerged victorious with 56% of the vote, while Irwandi Yusuf received only 29%. This result reflected solid rural support for the Aceh Party, contrasting with urban areas where Irwandi Yusuf had more support.

Post-election, despite initial violent confrontations, reconciliation efforts ensued, emphasizing the shared history between former GAM members and their recognition of common goals. The election highlighted the complex interplay between local democracy, historical grievances, and legal interpretations, shaping the post-conflict Aceh political landscape. Overall, the 2012 Aceh elections were pivotal in testing democratic institutions and community resilience in the region amidst lingering tensions and aspirations for stability and governance reform. In addition, the 2017 elections in Aceh Province were characterized by significant political tensions, repeating previous post-conflict elections.

Table 2. Aceh Election 2017 Vote Acquisition

Candidate	Party	Votes	Percentage (%)
Tarmizi Abdul Karim-Teuku Mucsalmina Ali	Golkar, NasDem, PPP	406.865	16,85%
Zakaria Saman–Alaidinsyah	Independent	132.981	5,51%
Abdullah Puteh–Sayed Mustafa Usab	Independent	41.908	1,74%
Zaini Abdullah–Nasaruddin	Independent	167.910	6,95%
Muzakir Manaf–TA Khalid	Partai Aceh, Gerindra, PBB, PKS	766.427	31,74%
Irwandi Yusuf–Nova Iriansyah	PNA, Demokrat, PDA, PKB, PDIP	898.710	37,22%
Total Valid Votes		2.414.801	100%
Registered Voters		3.434.722	

Source: KIP Provinsi Aceh, 2017

The leading contenders included former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) leaders, notably Muzakir Manaf and Irwandi Yusuf, reflecting the ongoing internal divisions within GAM since the 2006 elections. The campaign period was characterized by physical and non-physical conflict, underscoring the volatile nature of Aceh's electoral politics. Irwandi Yusuf's victory, supported by a coalition of the Aceh National

Party and other political groups, highlights the continued influence of former GAM figures in local government despite efforts to stabilize post-conflict dynamics. The election results represent a democratic transition of power amid ongoing grassroots tensions, rooted in part in differing interpretations of Aceh's political future among GAM elites.

Dynamics and Resolution of Internal Conflicts of Former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) Political Elites in Post-Helsinki Agreement Regional Elections

This research explores conflicts among former Free Aceh Movement (GAM) elites during post-peace elections in Aceh, focusing on elections held in 2006, 2012, and 2017. Initially, the 2006 elections allowed independent candidates under Law No. 11/2006, thus encouraging GAM elites such as Human Hamid and Hasbi Abdullah to contest, despite internal disputes and the neutrality of figures such as Muzakir Manaf to prevent internal GAM conflict. In 2012, tensions escalated between the Muzakir Manaf-led Aceh Party (PA) and Irwandi Yusuf, which was partly resolved by the intervention of the Constitutional Court, allowing the PA to contest the election. The formation of coalitions such as Koalisi Aceh Bermartabat (KAB) in 2014 and 2019 mediated the conflict between GAM elites, encouraging reconciliation through political platforms. These elections illustrate ongoing efforts to manage conflict among former GAM leaders amidst the democratic process in Aceh.

Hasan Tiro's leadership has been crucial to the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) since its inception in 1976, providing unity and authority both in exile and on the battlefield. His presence ensured cohesion among GAM leaders and fighters until his declining health necessitated a change in leadership. Malik Mahmud, despite being GAM's prime minister and instrumental in the Helsinki MoU, could not replace Tiro's central role due to a lack of internal recognition and trust. This leadership vacuum led to internal conflict among former GAM elites, which was exacerbated by power struggles, economic interests, and personal egos. Attempts to unite under figures such as Wali Nanggroe were undermined by competing ambitions, ultimately resulting in factional divisions within the Movement. Unlike other insurgent groups that maintained unity under a single leadership, GAM's post-Tiro era saw splits despite attempts to consolidate power. Mr. Aryos Nivada, a researcher and media leader at Aceh, states this.

> "*Being a trigger, yes, there are variable indicators, for example because of the central figure, power distribution, economic access, the role of the central elite, and ego. Now it remains to be seen which variables are very influential in the split, which has a level. This is very influential, middle and lower*".

> "*It is true, there is no recognition internally, he did not play his role to gain internal trust that he was not suitable and worthy to replace Hasan Tiro. More precisely, he is not on the same level as Hasan Tiro*".

The struggle of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) under Hasan Tiro was characterized by centralized command and unity, both in exile and in Aceh. Hasan Tiro's role as a unifying figure was crucial, maintaining cohesion among GAM leaders and fighters. After Hasan Tiro's declining health and eventual death, Malik Mahmud succeeded him but failed to unite the former GAM elite due to a lack of internal recognition and trust. Thus, it can be concluded that Hasan Tiro is irreplaceable. Mr. Taufiq Abdul emphasized the Head of the Research Institute of Muhammadiyah University of Aceh

> "*Hasan Tiro is a symbol of Aceh's resistance. Hasan Tiro was also the unifier of the armed Movement of the Free Aceh Movement, so once he was gone it began to split, including the groups that signed the peace agreement.*"

This is what underlies the formation of Wali Nanggroe to unite the people of Aceh. The requirements as Wali Nanggroe are stated in article 69 of Qonun 8/2012 as follows:

1. An Acehnese person who believes and is devoted to Allah SWT.
2. He is physically and mentally healthy and has reached the age of 40 (forty) lunar years.
3. Can speak Acehnese fluently and well.
4. He is known to be of excellent and noble descent and lineage, and his lineage is Acehnese, up to four descendants and above.
5. Has a noble character and is not tyrannical.
6. Noble and unjust
7. Knowledgeable, wise, prudent, and insightful
8. Brave and righteous and responsible
9. Fair, honest, loyal, and trustworthy
10. Patient, forgiving, humble, and compassionate
11. Loving the people and being loved by the people.

This leadership vacuum led to internal conflicts exacerbated by personal ambitions and factional interests. However, Wali Nanggroe's role as a unifying institution post-MoU Helsinki must effectively resolve the conflict in Aceh, with Malik Mahmud's affiliation with Partai Aceh limiting his broader unifying potential. Attempts to replace him have been discussed, highlighting the challenge of finding a leader capable of fulfilling the unifying role once held by Hasan Tiro.

The transformation of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) from a rebel organization to a political entity was triggered by a common enemy (the Indonesian government), and the dissolution of GAM after the peace agreement posed internal challenges. Despite efforts to integrate former GAM members into politics through the formation of the KPA and later political parties, conflicts persisted due to cultural attitudes toward violence and lingering power struggles. This process included legal and political maneuvers to ensure participation in elections, reflecting broader efforts at conflict transformation and peace consolidation in Aceh.

The Helsinki Peace Agreement significantly impacted former GAM fighters, who transitioned into influential roles within Partai Aceh and other areas during Aceh's post-conflict reconstruction. This led to new power structures and internal conflicts among former GAM elites. These conflicts mainly revolved around economic competition, political disputes, and ethnic tensions. Economic competition among GAM elites for political status, privileges, and lucrative contracts intensified, overshadowing broader public welfare goals. This competition often led to factionalism and hostility as elites vied to control government projects and resources. The political environment became characterized by power struggles and patronage networks, where control over projects and budgets took center stage.

Ethnic animosities also resurfaced, particularly between the dominant Acehnese ethnic group that supported GAM and the various non-Aceh ethnic minorities that historically opposed GAM. Perceptions of marginalization and unequal distribution of resources exacerbated these tensions. The distribution of special autonomy funds intended for Aceh's development often favored political elites and their networks over the wider community, leading to discontent and disillusionment among former combatants and the general population. The management of these funds is plagued by corruption and inefficiency, further undermining development efforts. The following is an explanation given by Mr. Aryos, a researcher and media leader at Aceh.

> "*Actually, who doesn't want to manage Aceh's large budget obtained through the special autonomy fund. Surely everyone wants it. So that after peace, many elites sat in the seats of*

power, there appeared a line of segmentation of the new rich among them. This situation created jealousy among them. They forgot to empower their friends who were struggling, and that made the conflict more pronounced, because of the indifference among them that gave rise to jealousy, so the embryo of the Movement emerged again. One of them was Din Dimini".

While the peace agreement initially promised economic progress and stability, the reality in Aceh highlights the continuing challenges associated with the elite capture of resources, ethnic tensions, and uneven development. These factors continue to shape Aceh's political landscape and pose challenges to sustainable peace and prosperity.

This research also looks at indications of government involvement in the local elections during Irwandi Yusuf's victory in the 2017 elections. Government intervention is one of the leading causes of conflict between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) elites. According to Irtanto (2006), the conflict in the local election process in Banyuwangi Regency was caused by the polarization of political elite interests, the interference of national elites, and the low maturity of local politics. Similar conflicts also occurred in Aceh, where the central government intervened to regulate the rhythm of local political dynamics to harmonize with the interests of the central elite. Wiratmadinata's (2022) observations suggest an intelligence operation within GAM to influence the outcome of the 2012 and 2017 local elections.

The nomination of Zaini Abdullah and Zakaria Saman in the 2017 Aceh regional elections, for example, was allegedly not purely from personal desire but rather the encouragement of other parties to split the PA (Aceh Party) base vote. Aryos Nivada suspects that specific interests poked them to run, while Rahim (2022) considers Zakaria's candidacy a budget grab. Support from national parties such as Democrat, PNA, PKB, PDA, and PDI P enabled the pair of Irwandi Yusuf and Nova Iriansyah to fulfill the nomination requirements through political party channels. Meanwhile, Zakaria Saman (often called Apa Karya) received assistance in collecting ID cards from Irwandi Yusuf to run through the independent route after Irwandi decided to run through the party route.

The PA's internal conflict and external interventions led to a vote split among supporters of the former GAM elite. The candidacies of several figures such as Zaini Abdullah, Zakaria Saman, Tarmizi Abdul Karim, and Apa Karya were allegedly designed to reduce the votes of the Muzakir Manaf-TA Khalid pair, which PA, PKS, Gerindra, and PBB supported. According to Aryos Nivada (2022), strong support from the central government for Irwandi Yusuf was seen in the 2017 local elections, where the central elites wanted Irwandi to win. Sofyan Dawud, who initially supported Tarmizi Karim, eventually supported the Irwandi Yusuf-Nova Iriansyah pair after an internal conflict with Tarmizi's campaign team.

The central government's success in controlling GAM forces was seen with the victory of the Irwandi Yusuf-Nova Iriansyah pair, who were later involved in a legal case that led to Irwandi's arrest. The government used various means to moderate GAM's power, including awarding and supporting the candidacy of former GAM elites in local elections to ensure that the PA did not dominate Aceh's local politics.

In addition, researchers found that the Aceh Party (PA) in post-conflict Aceh highlighted its struggles with political institutionalization and internal cohesion. Previously a guerrilla movement, the PA's transition into a political party has been marred by weak institutional frameworks and factionalism among elites. This is evidenced by the departure of key figures from the PA, such as Irwandi Yusuf, who founded the Aceh National Party (PNA), citing dissatisfaction with the PA's departure from its original ideals.

The lack of modern leadership and management systems within the PA has hindered effective

party consolidation and strategic implementation. A patronage model dominates decision-making, leading to factional divisions and a disconnect with the PA's original identity of fighting for Aceh's interests. The party's failure to democratically institutionalize itself has perpetuated internal conflict and weakened its governance capacity.

Despite the PA's control of the executive and legislature in Aceh, issues of poverty and injustice persist, exacerbated by economic mismanagement and unequal distribution of resources. The role of the central government in facilitating special autonomy funds has aimed to address these issues, but challenges remain in achieving sustainable development and equitable growth. This study emphasizes the need for vital institutional reforms within the PA to improve political stability, reduce factionalism, and better serve Aceh's socio-economic needs in the post-conflict era.

Conclusion

The conflict in Aceh has deep historical roots, stemming from grievances against central government policies that marginalized Acehnese aspirations and rights, dating back to colonial times and continuing through Indonesian independence. The Helsinki Agreement of 2005 marked a pivotal moment in Aceh's history, ending nearly three decades of armed conflict. It provided a framework for peace, autonomy, and integrating former GAM members into mainstream society. Post-peace elections in Aceh, particularly in 2006, 2012, and 2017, demonstrated the challenges and complexities of integrating former rebels into democratic governance. Internal divisions within GAM continued, revolving around leadership struggles, economic interests, and ideological differences. The establishment of the Aceh Transitional Committee (KPA) and Partai Aceh aimed to facilitate the reintegration of former combatants and their political participation. However, these efforts face continued internal conflict and external interventions, reflecting broader regional autonomy and central control tensions.

Economic competition, political maneuvering, and ethnic tensions continue to shape Aceh's political landscape, complicating sustainable peace and development efforts. Corruption, unequal resource distribution, and weak institutional frameworks within political parties exacerbate these challenges. While the Helsinki Agreement laid the foundation for peace and autonomy in Aceh, the region continues to undergo post-conflict transformation and governance reform. The path to sustainable peace requires addressing deep grievances, improving democratic institutions, and fostering inclusive development that benefits all Acehnese.

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