The Absurdity of Acehnese Identity Politics in the Post-Peace Democracy Process

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Abstract

Through a qualitative approach, this paper refers to a theoretical approach based on empirical phenomena regarding strengthening Aceh's identity politics in the post-peace democracy process. First, the constructivism approach explains that GAM can institutionalize itself democratically through political parties and even emerge as a new post-peace political elite. Second, the instrumentalism approach explains that GAM's political identity or ideology is increasingly integrative or blends with the awareness of Indonesian nationalism. Third, the provincialism approach shows that the Helsinki MoU agreement under Law Number 11 of 2006 concerning the Government of Aceh has not become a new way of crystallizing identity politics as necessary in a pluralistic Indonesian order. In this preference, empirically, the demoralization of GAM's ideology has not entirely disappeared because political identity in the frame of GAM's doctrine has become the main attraction in strengthening its existence so that it continues to survive. Local parties that should maintain Aceh's identity politics as a mandate for peace agreement seem disoriented. The reality of democracy has not substantially sided with the people. GAM combatants could present themselves as political identities in consolidating electoral democracy. Local parties, especially the Aceh Party as GAM identities, experienced delegitimization in electability during three periods of contestation. Still, political identity was more associated with the formation or hegemony of power. Identity politics is more than just affirming plurality, culture, customs, language, values, and depictions of religiously coded instruments as primary protectors; on the contrary, in principle, the benefits of democracy and peace lead to the consolidation of local political systems. The central Government's commitment to finalizing several regulations is considered inconsistent, so the form of Aceh's identity politics seems even more absurd.

Keywords: *Identity Politics, Democracy, Peace, GAM.*

INTRODUCTION

Identity politics is currently the civilizational discourse that gets the most response [1]. This is because political identity is a struggle for communities who feel marginalized in national and state life. It is miserable if identity politics is often framed in a negative frame, dwarfed without an explanation of what kind of identity to watch out for because not all identity politics are characterized as harmful and destructive. Political identity is not only carried by those who express their religion in public spaces, but identity can give birth to many faces. Advocating for marginalized groups such as people with disabilities, workers, urban poor, farmers, fishermen, religious communities, and indigenous communities are a few other forms of political identity. It should be placed in its proper position and measured.

Identity politics itself is a new concept in the study of political science. Identity politics is another name for biopolitics and political differences. Biopolitics bases itself on differences arising from differences in bodies. In philosophy, this discourse has appeared for a long time. Still, its application in the study of political science emerged after a symposium was presented at an international meeting of the International Political Science Association in Vienna in 1994 [1].

Various previous studies have discussed identity politics, as research from Agnes Heller concluded that identity is a political movement that places differences as the main political category *(politics of difference)*. Consequently, identity politics form an apparent distinction between which groups are involved in the same identity and other groups that are different by creating the categories of "us" and "them" inside and outside [2]. Meanwhile,

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Fukuyama (2018), in his book "Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment," *describes in detail how identity politics occurs even in developed countries such as the United States and European countries.*

Agnes Heller (1995) and Donald L Morowitz (1998) reveal a common thread: identity politics is interpreted differently. This concept also colored the results of the International Political Association Symposium held in Vienna 1994 [3]. Another impression from the Vienna meeting was the birth of the foundations for the practice of identity politics. Meanwhile, Kemala Chandakirana (1989), in her article Geertz and Ethnic Issues, states that Political identity is usually used by leaders as political rhetoric with our designation for the desired "original people" and at this time manifests itself in many ways.

Identity politics is a form that accentuates the differences between groups to get votes from most groups [4]. Lately, identity politics often comes before elections because it is frequently used to get a share of power by overthrowing the opposing party through identity politics. This can be seen in the dynamics of identity politics in the Aceh region, which were created through regional head elections (Pilkada) and the domination of DPRD members in drafting Qanuns or provincial regulations, especially in the particular autonomous regions. Law Number 23 of 2014 concerning regional Government as a form of decentralization politics is a constructive tool for developing identity politics in the local sphere.

The existence of decentralization politics that strengthens identity politics in Aceh is supported by Law Number 11 of 2006 concerning the Law on Governing Aceh (UUPA). UUPA is a peace agreement between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) to end the vertical conflict that has been going on for decades. The peace agreement between the two is stated in the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Government of Indonesia and GAM, signed on August 15, 2005, in Helsinki, Finland [5]. The Helsinki MoU manifests the struggle for peace, which has become the lifeblood of politics in Aceh and Aceh's decentralization politics [5].

UUPA, as the legal basis that regulates the implementation of special Autonomy in Aceh, gives authority to Aceh to make Qanuns on Flags and Coats of Arms and Aceh Hymns coupled with the growth of local political parties and the Wali Nanggroe Institution as an independent institution that unites customs and people [6]. The spectrum of identity politics ranges from authoritarian democracy, equality to partiality, and modern to local wisdom. Syafii Ma'arif (2012) states that identity politics is substantively associated with the interests of members of a social group who feel squeezed and pushed aside by the domination of large currents within a nation or state. This is because the practice of resistance to detention, oppression, and power of the majority and minority has occurred throughout human history.

This research focuses on efforts to examine the phenomenon behind the blurring of identity politics in the democratic process that emerged after the peace in Aceh. Peace in Aceh is the decision of an identity political action because every political effort must carry its identity, and every identity must require politics in its existence; it is through identity that politics has meaning. It is through the presence of identity that political action can be assessed. Therefore, the understanding of Aceh's unique political identity, which has a post-peace democracy, is expected to become a humanistic enlightenment in dignifying the life of the nation and state. This picture is explained as a unique and special phenomenon for Aceh and the Central Government in managing political life in the country. The conflict that lasted 32 years and ended in peace is a valuable lesson that political identity or identity politics is necessary as an instrument of national sovereignty.

Theoretical Basis

Identity politics has had a special place in recent years. The study of postcolonial identity politics has been involved for a long time. Thinkers like Ania Loomba (2003), Homi K. Bhabha (2007), and Gayatri C Spivak in Saputri (2019) are names who usually talk about it. They missed because they contributed to placing identity politics as a creation in historical and cultural discourse. Meanwhile, identity politics is sharply distinguished between identity politics and identity politics in political science literature. Political identity is a construction that determines the position of the subject's interests in the bond of a political community. In contrast, political identity refers to the political mechanism of organizing identity (both identity politics and social identity) as a source and means of politics [7].

Various viewpoints in seeing the phenomenon of identity politics. Pierre Van Den Bergh (1991) and Ubed Abdillah (2002) in Endang Sari (2016) explain three theoretical perspectives in studying political identity, namely *primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism.* The following figure is known:
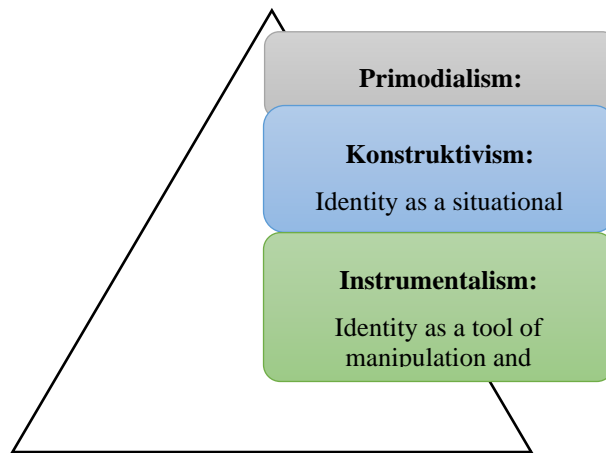

Figure 1: Section paradigm of seeing Identity Politics

Source: Pierre Van Den Bergh, 1991

The first approach is the primordialism argument that sees religious phenomena in socio-biological categories. This view holds that social groups are characterized by images of territory, religion, culture, language, and social organization as *'given'* and cannot be denied. This view emphasizes the presence of primordial ethnic and religious identities that function as a glue for a community. Definitively, adherents of primordialism emphasize efforts to capture group interests and the ability of collective identity to sharpen and articulate general views of the past and present and shape visions for the future [8].

The second approach is the constructivist developed by Frederik Barth (1988). This theory views religious and cultural identity as a complex process when symbolic boundaries continue to be built by the benefits of mythology that take place through language and past experiences. Further argues that religion and ethnicity constantly change and that the boundaries demarcating an ethnic group are often negotiated and renegotiated. It depends on the political struggle among existing groups. But, this identity negotiation phenomenon is situational. At this limit, actors try to exploit cultural symbols and display certain ethnic behaviors that change from time to time according to certain situations or social interests [9].

Ethnic and religious identities have always been the main thing in building differentiating categories among the many identities displayed; ethnic and religious identities will always have a space or place. Every ethnicity and religion can develop and survive, and cultural and moral values can become characteristic of the identity when interacting. This constructivist approach believes that the formation of boundaries and features is determined by the group, forming its pattern. The existence of ethnic and religious differences in society is caused more by the process of maintaining ethnic and spiritual status in a multicultural society. In this relationship, the minority group becomes subordinate to the majority group that dominates this social relationship. In this condition, it is this minority that becomes ethnic and religious, unique, or even alienated and strange [8].

In the third view, from a theoretical point of view, the instrumentalists pay more attention to processing and political mobilization. According to them, when these social groups are composed based on the initial attributes of ethnicity, such as nationality, religion, race, and language, then that is when the group mobilizes interests. Instrumentalists also explain that ethnic and religious identities are always used as a means for ethnic and religious elites to manipulate these identities for their benefit. This view assumes that minority groups tend to serve as a profitable majority group. David Brown (1989) explains in Ethnic Revival: Perspectives on State and Society the following: "Fear and intimidation often occur in conditions where ethnic/religious violence occurs, cannot be used for identity analysis in situations of non-violent competition, such as general elections" [10].

This view of David Brown (1989) is in line with the opinion of Donal Horowitz (1998), who explains that ethnicity (religion) can indeed be manipulated (instrumentalism), but race is also widely accepted. In this case, belief is innate (primordial). In many ways, the instrumentalist approach has received a lot of criticism because it is considered too materialist and does not consider the positive primordial relationship of a person to his ethnicity/religion. However, various empirical evidence that primordial identity is often used as a political instrument cannot be ignored because this happens in multiple arenas and political situations. In the next stage, the construction of religious identity is then used as instrumentalism. The aim is as a tool for social processing and mobilization to strengthen religion's attributes as a power tool, as explained above [9].

More concisely, Widayanti (2009) provides an identity formation approach. First, primordialism. Identity is obtained naturally and passed down from generation to generation. Second constructivism. Identity is something formed and the result of a complex social process. Identity can be created through cultural ties in society. Third instrumentalism. Identity is constructed for the benefit of the elite and is more emphasized on power [11].

METHODOLOGY

This type of research is Phenomenology. In summary, the phenomenological approach aims to obtain an interpretation of the understanding (subject) of visible phenomena and the meaning behind them by using a contextual qualitative approach. This research is located in Aceh and takes data from various sources, including literature and mass media, and quotes from several sources. The author uses the analytical method of qualitative analysis, which formulates logical thinking, analysis with logic, induction, analogy-interpretation, comparison, and the like. The thinking method is the inductive method, from data to a higher level of abstraction, including synthesizing and developing theory (if needed and the data supports it). This analysis will conclude with a response to the existing problems.

DISCUSSION

Dynamics of Identity Politics in the Democratic Process in Aceh

Discussions about democracy and identity politics cannot be separated from time to time, and they undergo a change process. The practice of democracy and identity politics provides an opportunity for society to be empowered to make assumptions about the strength of identity related to religion, culture, and others. Democracy is the only political system option that can best guarantee the political rights of citizens, as well as ensure the continuity of the circulation of political leadership in a country above freedom and guarantee that everyone has equal rights in politics. However, democracy is not the only way to achieve human benefit, be it justice, prosperity, and peace.

The signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) and the Indonesian Government on August 15, 2005, in Helsinki, which marked the end of the three-year separatist conflict decades in Aceh, gave rise to new hopes where democracy becomes one of the most valuable instruments for resolving conflicts and building peace. Conflict resolution in Aceh has both theoretical and practical meanings. Theoretically, suppose the peaceful settlement of the Aceh problem can run successfully. In that case, this can illustrate how peace and democracy are a unit and how democracy can generate momentum to carry out dialogue and negotiation in conflict resolution.

Practically speaking, if the peace process in Aceh continues, a genuine incentive to participate in the negotiations is a significant indication for initiating peace talks. This becomes even more significant when standard peace settlement procedures in DDR - *disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration* can result *in sustainable peace.* The democratic process is crucial because the peace process can ensure that former combatants can be involved in the local political process.

After the GAM-RI peace MoU was signed, the big agenda that had to be formulated was how to transform an ideology of Free Aceh into New Aceh, which had to be developed at the contextual-ideological level and the practical level. Of course, the substantive idea of "independence" cannot be dismissed because this idea goes beyond the political demands of secession and concerns the essential nature of political rights for both

individuals and the people of Aceh. Even though it is now wrapped in Indonesia, the meaning of independence must be achieved through the practice of democracy in Aceh.

The historical potential that Aceh has, namely the strength of resistance which, if it can be transformed into the power of civil society, will have a significant influence on the development of social democracy with the special Autonomy that it currently has; it allows it to be used as an experimental arena for social democracy. The subsequent struggle is institutionalizing an influential role to achieve Aceh's ideals of social justice. The various qanuns issued constitute an essential starting point in addition to the political democracy experiments that have been carried out, such as holding legislative and executive general elections at the local level. The following is a picture of the democratic process in the Aceh election, which was dominated by identity politics.
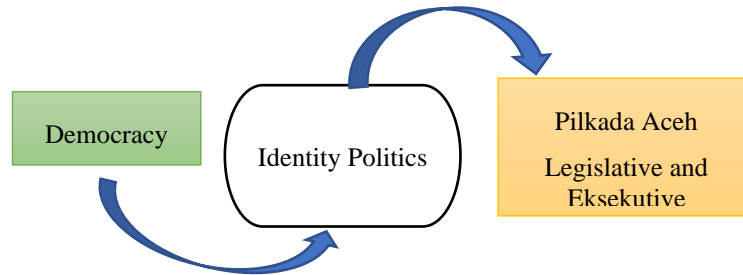

Figure 2 . Democracy and Dynamics from Identity Politics in Elections

Identity politics has colored democracy in the Aceh regional elections; this struggle has never subsided since the New Order Government. The political escalation continues to experience changes, especially the issue of regional leadership. Some elements of society are driven by the case of sons of the region and former fighters for Free Aceh, not only at the level of the political elite, but their euphoria extends to the grassroots *(grassroots)*. The initial steps to struggle for political identity in Aceh began in 2006 when the first regional head elections were held on December 11, 2006, in 19 districts/cities. Some of the things that distinguish the implementation of regional elections in Aceh from other regions are those carried out by the Aceh Independent Electoral Commission (KIP). In addition, the candidates at that time were allowed to come from individual candidates.

Olle Tornquist (2008) in Kamaruddin (2011) also underlined that Aceh since the imperialist era, Aceh has become a political, social, cultural, and legal laboratory that attracts international researchers to study. Periodically, the root of the problem of the Aceh conflict is the non-actualization of Acehnese identity within the *nation-state,* which is a dominating, centralized, militaristic, and authoritarian political system by the Central Government. It is also understandable why the Dutch East Indies government's war request on March 26, 1873, was met with staunch resistance by all components of the Acehnese people at that time. For decades, they could be punished. The goal is obviously to maintain Acehnese identity.

P Reference to The Identity Politics Oo New Political Elites In Aceh

Aceh is one of Indonesia's "hot" (vulnerable to violent conflict) regions. It was so hot before the 2005 Helsinki MoU agreement, and Aceh only felt mild conditions for ten years, from 1966 to 1976. The peace that is felt today, from 2005 to 2020, is the most extended piece Aceh has felt while being part of Indonesia in 1945. Unlike when it was part of Dutch colonialism, Aceh was in a state of non-violent peace from 1911 to 1942 [12].

A climate of war and conflict strengthens Aceh's political identity. The last was when the Dutch tried colonizing Aceh and other archipelago places [12]. This effort then received a great response from the people of Aceh. Remember, the Aceh War was the most challenging and consumed many resources for the Netherlands. Even though Aceh's political identity existed long before it became part of Indonesia, community support was essential and dynamic in the context of war, especially for the elite. But of course, it is in the interests of the elite who can influence a wider audience, including in efforts to integrate Aceh into the hands of the authorities.

Epstein and Mershon (1996) state that the political preferences of a person or elite group can be used to predict behavior or political decisions to be taken in the future. Segal and Cover's research (1992) in Takdir (2021) explains that ideological preference is one of the most influential political preferences of the political elite. In the context of this case study in Aceh, the political priorities of the political elites in Aceh can be weakened by the political ideology that they have adhered to so far, namely the doctrine of GAM or Tiroism, which has gradually entered the Aceh government, both the executive and parliament safely along with the democratic process.
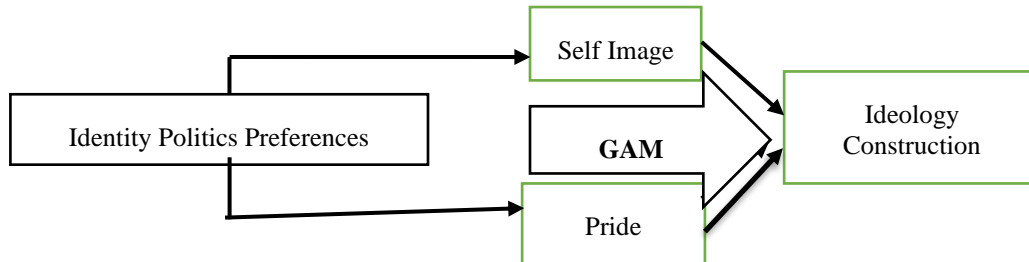

Figure 3. Political references Identity and Ideological Construction

The strengthening of this identity arose when the identity conceptualized to accommodate it could not represent or identify these groups. In addition, the group's strength also creates tension between groups to gain dominance from a concept that will be built. The strengthening of group identity to make it dominate within a forum or even outside of a meeting is known as Identity Politics. The fundamental goal of politics is to achieve the common good. So no matter how, whether by using identity politics or political identity, as long as a government built based on politics can realize the common good, it will be good.

The phenomenon stems from how to lay the foundation for GAM's struggle and then transform into new post-peace elites. Because its military wing turned into a civilian institution called the Aceh Transitional Committee (KPA), this institution gathered all its military and civilian forces during the early transition period. However, during this early period, GAM had not yet formed a political vehicle to continue Aceh's political struggle within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) framework. Although without a political car, the general elections for regional heads, which were held a year after the peace, namely 2006, succeeded in winning the Governor as head of the Aceh region from GAM fighters. The success of winning the executive seats and the following year, namely 2009, most of the legislative seats positioned the ex-combatants group as the new elite in Aceh.

This change in the order of the elite gave it a different color from the previous elites, who had always been loyal to Jakarta's instructions. The former combatant group presents a more aggressive and confident way of playing against the Central Government. This feeling was born from the aspect of "specificity" based on the Helsinki MoU peace agreement, which was translated into Law Number 11 of 2006 concerning the Government of Aceh. Apart from that, Aceh also has a "privilege" aspect, which is, according to Law Number 44 of 1999, concerning the privileges of Aceh as a new singer of existing political identities [13].

As a new spirit, it can be seen how various psychological confrontations often occurred during the early post-peace era, from the issue of establishing the Law on Governing Aceh, the establishment of the Wali Nanggroe Institute, the case of the Acehnese flag, which is similar to GAM and the issue of the Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Identity politics in democracy in Aceh, to be the same 18 years after the peace, has not yet given direction to the expected democratic substance. That is, the political shift in democracy is still at the procedural level on election issues and the changing of political elites who are playing. The true goal is that a democratically prosperous society is still within the limits of desire [14].

Local Parties and Strengthening Acehnese Identity Politics

One of the contents of the Aceh Peace MoU agreement is to accommodate the formation of local political parties because GAM agreed to change the area of its struggle from armed to political battle [15]. Muhammad Yusrizal (2020) said that legally, the Government has further strengthened the legality of the establishment of local parties in Aceh by passing Government Regulation (PP) Number 20 of 2007 concerning Acehnese Local

Political Parties [16]. The Government of Aceh followed up the legalization of the presence of local parties in Aceh by making Aceh Qanun Number 8 of 2007 concerning Financial Assistance to Political Parties and Local Political Parties as a form of financial subsidy contribution to political parties and local political parties [17].

In addition, to welcome the 2009 election, matters related to the 2009 election participants were regulated by ratifying the Aceh Qanun Number 3 of 2008 concerning Local Political Parties Participating in the General Election of Members of the Aceh People's Legislative Assembly and Regency/City People's Representative Council [18]. The existence of regulations passed by the Central Government and Regional Governments proves that the presence of local political parties is recognized in the legal system in Indonesia. Thus, the political system in Aceh consists of political parties, or what is often referred to as national parties, and local political parties or parlors.

The struggle for political identity was greatly influenced by the transitional transformation of former GAM combatants from demanding Aceh's independence to becoming a political force. The essential factor of this movement's identity political petition is the hope to implement the values by its provisions in Acehnese society. This can be seen from several regional regulations (Qanun), which are dominated by loading Islamic values, as a forum that can realize these ideals by using Aceh's political system, not through gun violence. For example, hymns, symbols, and flags of Aceh and the Wali Nanggroe Institution are images of realizing political identity. This ensures that elite groups can be modified through identity politics so that they are not limited to ideological, ethnic, and religious concepts [17]. As illustrated in the following image regarding the Resurgence of Post-Peace Aceh Political Identity:

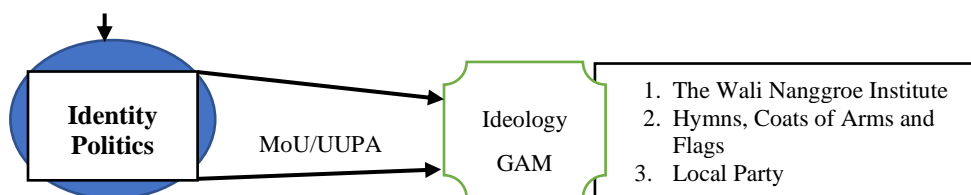## Privileges of Religion and Custom

Figure 4. The Resurgence of Aceh's Post-Peace Political Identity

The contribution to the struggle for local party identity also received an excellent response from the Aceh Traditional Council (MAA) by observing many local party cadres who became legislature members. The role of regional parties is perfect because when they sit in the legislature, they touch the community a lot, so their existence is essential. Contribution of local parties in fighting for customary Qanuns, traditional institutions, and customary court dispute resolution. Acehnese local political parties struggle to maintain the existence of Islamic political identity in the Aceh government system. This is in line with one of the essential functions of political parties: recruiting candidates to fill political positions. As explained above, the cadres who came from former GAM combatants and struggle activists succeeded in gaining the trust of the people of Aceh. This proves that the people of Aceh hope they will continue to fight for local values (Acehnese) through government leadership. After the 2006 Aceh regional head election, KPA established a political wing called the Aceh Party (PA) in 2007. PA is one of the local political parties whose existence was accommodated thanks to the Helsinki MoU. PA is a park with great political power in contesting local democracy [19].

By the previous description and discussion, the presence of local political parties in Aceh changed the pattern of physical struggle into political struggle. The main thing local party identity politics demands in Aceh is the realization of the implementation of the Helsinki Peace MoU. Through local parties, former combatants try to maintain the specificity of the local community. To preserve the existence of regional political parties in Aceh so that they can fight for their political identity, local political parties must have robust human resources as the main supporting factor and consolidation of cadres so that they can represent the aspirations of the people of Aceh [20].

In theory, if we look at the goals of local political parties, they are classified into three parts: *First,* Minority Rights. Regional political parties are established to protect and advance the economic, social, cultural, language,

and educational rights of certain minority groups. *Second,* Gaining Autonomy, local political parties that want to gain Autonomy for their region or increase the Autonomy that the part already has as identity politics. *Third, to* achieve independence, local political parties fight for the freedom of independent areas and the formation of a new state. Of course, this point is no longer based on Government Regulation Number 20 of 2007 concerning Local Political Parties in Aceh [21].

CONCLUSION

Drawing a common thread to see at what point identity politics colored the life of the post-peace Acehnese felt ambiguous. The abstractions presented still need critical analysis to construct contextual generalizations more fundamentally. At least the theoretical paradigm and empirical phenomena in this paper can be framed in the following two concerns. First, peace is the hope that the democratic process will give Aceh the impetus to rise, be strong, and be empowered politically and as an identity. The relationship between the two influences the agenda of identity politics. Second, identity politics appears to be collective imaginary but has not been critically dialogued and institutionalized by the goals, dignity, and restoration of peace. In these two propositions, what emerges is not an identity political agenda but the affirmation of political identity that is primordialism, recitative, and Aufklarung in nature.

The reality is that GAM combatants can show themselves as political identities in the sense of electoral consolidation of democracy but substantially have not been able to fight for the agenda of identity politics entirely. Political identity is more identified with the establishment or hegemony of power even though local parties-especially the Aceh Party, as GAM's identity in the past in three periods of contestation experienced delegitimization in terms of electability. Meanwhile, identity politics exists in its ethos but is weak in its actions. Even the Wali Nanggroe Institute, as a unifier of Acehnese customs, has not been able to formulate Acehnese identity politics progressively.

Based on the phenomenon that is currently taking place, it feels paradoxical to draw a conclusion on which side of the theoretical approach can be emphasized. Identity politics is not merely the affirmation of culture, customs, language, values, plurality, and depiction of religious-encoded instruments as the principal patron. Still, in principle, the fruits of peace and democracy lead to strengthening local-based political systems. The ambiguity between identity politics and identity politics is palpable. Therefore, the manifestation of post-peace Aceh political identity is still just a trace that has not been found in its grave. The absurdity of identity politics in the context of Aceh as a nation's pride and dignity must not be strengthened so that it leads to disintegrative threats in the future.

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