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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Transformation of Ethnonationalist Ideology among Former the Free Aceh Movement Combatants After the MoU Helsinki Peace Agreement in Bireuen Regency

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**Abstract:** Bireuen Regency is one of the vital base areas for the Free Aceh Movement (GAM). This movement was established in 1976 and was led by Hasan Tiro. Throughout the movement, the Bireuen district became the birthplace of influential GAM fighter figures during the Aceh conflict. While actively fighting for Indonesian independence, GAM carried the ideology of Acehnese ethnonationalism. However, after the signing of the MoU on the Helsinki peace agreement on December 15, 2005, former GAM combatants transformed into a local political party in Aceh and participated in national elections. This study is interesting to examine because this transformation aligns with the acceptance of the ideology of Indonesian nationalism. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the factors that led to the transformation of ethnonationalist ideology among former GAM combatants after the Helsinki MoU in Bireuen Regency. Using qualitative methods based on interviews, the results of this study show that four factors caused the transformation of GAM ideology: peace factors, profit orientation, comfort, compulsion, and disappointment.

**Keywords:** Nationalism, GAM, MoU Helsinki, Ideology Transformation

## 1. Introduction

The Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was founded by Hasan Tiro on December 4, 1976, on Mount Halimoon Pidie. The emergence of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) received a repressive response from the New Order government by sending the Indonesian Military (TNI) in large numbers during the Military Operation (DOM), which resulted in many casualties due to this incident (Sari, 2018). The GAM ideology born from this movement's initial formation was Acehnese ethnonationalism, which opposed Indonesian nationalism. Acehnese ethnonationalism caused GAM to desire to separate itself from Indonesia and establish an independent Acehnese state (Brown, 2005; Sari et al., 2019). Since 1976, a prolonged conflict has occurred in Aceh and ended with the signing of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on August 15, 2005.

One of the significant changes was the transformation of GAM into a local political party (Barter, 2011; Sari et al., 2023). This transformation is in line with the waning of Aceh's sense of ethnonationalism and being replaced by Indonesian nationalism. In the context of Aceh, the Bireuen Regency is one of the GAM base districts (Pemerintah Kabupaten Bireuen, 2023). Influential GAM figures in the Bireuen district include Darwis Jeunib (GAM commander in the Batee Iliiek area); Samsul Bahri (commander of Sago GAM



Region II Bireuen); Husaini M Amin better known as Teungku Batee (Batee Iiek Regional Operations Commander); Amiruddin alias Cage (perpetrator and witness to the history of Aceh's struggle against Jakarta's domination); and Teungku Abdullah Syafi'i (GAM commander in the Pidie region).

GAM Bireuen figures initially fought for the ideology of Acehnese ethnonationalism and opposed Indonesian nationalism. However, after the peace, GAM Bireuen figures chose to transform into local political parties and return to Indonesian nationalism. Several GAM Bireuen figures entered the realm of politics by running for the People's Representative Council (DPR) or other vital positions in the realm of government. Like Rusyidi Mukhtar, a former GAM combatant who has become chairman of the Bireuen DPRK for the 2019-2024 period. Furthermore, Husaini Franco is also a former GAM combatant who occupied a government seat as deputy chairman of the Bireuen DPRK in 2012, and Fadli Abdullah Adam (Petrus) once ran for DPD RI in 2019.

This ideological transformation is interesting to study, considering the phenomenon of GAM combatants who were previously anti-government but are now starting to blend into the government. After the peace agreement of MoU Helsinki, GAM combatants began to accept Indonesian nationalism. This is proven by several GAM combatants who occupy essential positions in the government, such as the Governor and Regent (Nurhasim, 2009). Based on the background described, this study aims to analyze the transformation of ethnonationalist ideology among former GAM combatants after the Helsinki MoU in Bireuen Regency.

## 2. Method

This study uses qualitative methods with descriptive analysis. Qualitative descriptive research is intended to classify a phenomenon or social reality by describing it (Silalahi, 2012). This research obtained an objective explanation, especially in reviewing further the problem that the researcher carried out, namely regarding the transformation of ethnonationalist ideology among former GAM combatants after the Helsinki MoU in the Bireuen Regency.

Primary data sources were obtained directly by researchers through in-depth interviews. The informants selected are people who can provide information about the problem being researched. For this reason, this study interviewed four GAM combatants and one community member affected by the conflict in Bireuen. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained through books, journals, newspapers, and from sources related to other authors' titles.

## 3. Result and Discussion

### 3.1. Bireuen Regency, Conflict and Base of the Free Aceh Movement

Bireuen Regency is known in historical records as the Jeumpa area. In the past, Jeumpa was a small kingdom in Aceh. According to Ibrahim Abduh in Radja Jeumpa's Overview, the Jeumpa kingdom was located in Blang Seupeung village, Jeumpa subdistrict, Bireuen district. Bireuen Regency has its capital in Bireuen and has become an autonomous region since 12 October 1999 due to the expansion of North Aceh Regency. This district is known as its fighting city. It is strategically located, crosses a national road, is flanked by several districts, and is a regional trade center (Pemerintah Kabupaten Bireuen, 2023).

Since the conflict between GAM and RI in 1976, which Tiro proclaimed on Mount Halimoon Pidie, Bireuen has produced many GAM figures. Several influential figures include Amiruddin alias Cage, one of the perpetrators and witnesses to the history of Aceh's struggle against Jakarta's domination. Moreover, Teungku Abdullah Syafi'i, who was born in Bireuen on 12 October 1947, is a charismatic and respected GAM commander, and he is also known as a consistent figure in the GAM line of struggle (Akob & Nuryanti, 2019; Schulze, 2004). Darwis Jeunib is the GAM commander in the Batee Iiek area. Then

there is Samsul Bahri, better known as Tiyong, who is the commander of the Sago GAM Region II Bireuen. Husaini M Amin, or Teungku Batee, who is more familiarly known, is the operations commander for the Batee Iliiek area with a troop of up to 2,000 people.

In Bireuen Regency, four areas became red zones during the conflict between GAM and RI. These include Zone 1 Pasee/Perlak North Aceh, zone 2 in Bireuen/Batee Illiek Regency, zone 3 East Aceh, and Zone 4 Pidie. Bireuen Regency became a Red Zone 2 area at that time, which claimed millions of lives. Furqan, one of the Bireuen residents who was a victim of the conflict, explained:

“I still remember being in grade 5 of elementary school and feeling the conditions of GAM's war with RI. I saw extraordinary gunfire taking place. Because Bireuen is also a GAM base in Aceh, many, especially our brothers in the Juli area, were displaced. The roads were jammed, military operations were taking place, and there were many casualties in Bireuen if we look at the media at that time” (interview 17 June 2020).

The conflict in the Bireuen area has recorded a history of deaths and disappearances of civilians as per the data (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Recapitulation of Data on Deaths and Disappearances Due to the Bireuen Regency Conflict

NO	Subdistrict	Number of Victims
1	Samalanga	135
2	Simpang Mamplam	251
3	Pandrah	221
4	Jeunib	275
5	Peulimbang	169
6	Peudada	255
7	Jeumpa	207
8	Kota Juang	260
9	Juli	253
10	Kuala	105
11	Peusangan	301
12	Jangka	174
13	Peusangan Selatan	133
14	Peusangan Siblih Krueng	160
15	Kutablang	166
16	Makmur	139
17	Gandapura	102
Total of Victims		3.306

Source: Implementing unit of the Aceh Reintegration Agency (BRA) Bireuen Regency, 2020

The data above shows the large number of victims who died and disappeared during the conflict between GAM and RI in Bireuen Regency, which left quite a scar and trauma on the community. The conflict between the Indonesian government and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) continued until the government implemented Military Emergency status for Aceh in 2003. After going through several dialogue processes, they failed to reach a common ground or agreement between GAM and the Indonesian government. Then, on August 15, 2005, a peace agreement was signed, which was facilitated by Martti Ahtisari with the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI) known as a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). After that, GAM began to adapt to new things, internal developments within the group, and awareness of thought patterns emerged (Sari et al., 2022). Data on former GAM combatants is shown in the table 2.

**Table 2.** Recapitulation of Data on Former GAM Combatants by Region in the Batee Iliek Region, Bireuen Regency

No	Name of District	Number of Former GAM	Region
1	District I	1371	Samalanga, Sp.Mamplam, Pandrah, Jeunib, Plimbang
2	District II	4219	Peudada, Jeumpa, Juli, Kota Juang, Kuala
3	District III	422	Peusangan, Jangka, Psg.Selatan, Psg.Siblah Krueng
4	District IV	976	Kutablang, Makmur, Gandapura
Total		6988	

Source: Implementing unit of the Aceh Reintegration Agency (BRA) Bireuen Regency, 2020

Since the aftermath of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (Helsinki MoU) peace agreement, the situation in the Bireuen district has gradually begun to return to normal. The Free Aceh Movement was disbanded under the auspices of the Aceh Transition Committee (KPA), and the weapons previously used by GAM combatants were withdrawn into the hands of the Government and destroyed.

The conflict between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) in Aceh was initially an educational campaign for Aceh's ethnonationalism. Hasan Tiro criticized "Javanese" colonial rule, especially the exploitation of Aceh's natural resources and using military force to maintain control. After the declaration of GAM in 1976, this movement occasionally spread propaganda and raised the GAM flag in various locations. However, few took military action. When Hasan Tiro returned from exile in 1976, this was known to the central Government. This caused the Government to look for GAM leaders, so they fled abroad and consolidated their movement from various countries.

In the first stage of its emergence, this movement was only supported by intellectuals, technocrats, and businesspeople. It ultimately became a massive movement and received much sympathy from the people of Aceh and the international world. Furthermore, in the second stage, the rebellion between 1989 and 1999 was led by GAM leaders in Malaysia. They recruited hundreds of Acehnese from various circles, including ordinary people, students, and others living in Aceh and Malaysia, to undergo military training in Libya. When sending troops to Libya in the first phase, there were 401 people, including Mualem. In the second phase, the Darwis Jeunib group became Commander of GAM region I Batee Iliek during the conflict with RI. For one year in Libya, they were trained by the military at Tanjura Camp. After returning to Aceh in 1989, they launched a series of guerilla attacks. GAM began to be better armed and launch more intense attacks. Darwis Jeunib said the same thing during a direct interview; he emphasized:

"Hasan Tiro established diplomatic relations with Libya. Then, they took the nation's children there to be trained as soldiers. "The first wave was 401 people, the first wave was like Mualem, then my second wave (Darwis Jeunib), my fourth wave returned, that was in 1989. and so on until wave 7. I went there using a Malaysian KTP and departed via Singapore." (interview 28 June, 2020).

Recruitment for Free Aceh Movement (GAM) troops was performed in stages from various elements. In Bireuen Regency, many Acehnese women also participated in the GAM struggle. They took up arms, were logistics couriers, and were campaigners abroad. There are around 3000 female troops or so-called inong bale troops throughout Aceh. In Bireuen, several areas are training places for Acehnese and Inong Bale army troops, such as Cot Cruet; in the Jeunib area itself, there are two training places for Garot and Paya Bili,

Samalanga, Matang, and others. This was also conveyed during a direct interview with the Commander of the Bate region, Iliak Darwis Jeunib, who said:

“The training places in Bireuen are located in the Cot Kruet area, Matang, the Peusangan Siblahkrueng area, then in Jeunib there are two places in Garut and Paya Bilie, in Samalanga there is one place so there are three places so there are a lot of female soldiers here, especially in the Jeunib area. “Almost every village has 3 Inong Bale troops” (interview 28 June, 2020)

The ceasefire seemed to have no respite in the city of Bireuen. The Distance is 218 kilometers from the city of Banda Aceh. This area, which has a population of 300 thousand people, has known war before the military operations of the Indonesian National Army (TNI). Consisting of seven sub-districts and 516 villages and sub-districts, Bireuen Regency stretches over 1,900 square kilometers in a lowland area with a mountainous backdrop. Bireuen is often a place of fighting. The TNI began its military operations in Aceh from this area when it landed marine troops on Samalanga Beach. After that, they were followed by GAM troops in the Bireuen area, known as the Batee Iliak area, led by Teungku Darwis Jeunib. Towards the evening of June 10, 2003, GAM, who were on alert in the hills, intercepted a TNI convoy in the village of Matang Kumbang. From Sudan Hill, GAM soldiers began raining fire on the TNI on the mountain slopes.

This war meant that children could not usually go to school. A woman from Inong Balee (GAM's Women military) also expressed in the Bireuen area who did not want to give her name said:

“there was no way before, never felt that schools were safe; many schools were burned down. At that time, the children were better off at home because when they came out, our hearts (parents) were not calm (interview 29 June, 2020).

Almost all of GAM's elite troops are fully armed with AK-47 rifles, grenade launchers, and handy talkies as communication tools. The fighting in the Sudanese hills began with a grenade attack from the top of the hill towards Indonesian military trucks on patrol. Thousands of Bireuen residents fled to safe places close to the military barracks.

### *3.2. Factors Causing the Ideological Transformation of Former GAM Combatants in Bireuen*

Theoretically, ideology is a system of values and beliefs that is accepted as fact and truth for a group of people. The scope of ideology is extensive and can originate from many things, such as beliefs, attitudes, religion, politics, philosophy, or ethnic identity. When a group adheres to a particular ideology, their mindset will be formed, and they will carry out their lives according to that ideology. Ideology has unique characteristics, namely a firm formulation and aims at systemic integration around certain beliefs. Historically, ideology has been closely related to the birth of social movements. Some of them include the birth of the democratic movement in the 17th century and the birth of the Marxist movement in the 20th century (Martin, 2015; Sargent, 2008; Sari et al., 2019).

Ideology can be used to explain the motivation for the actions of a particular group. In this study, the ideology discussed is “Aceh ethnonationalism” as the motor of GAM. During the Aceh conflict, the ideology of Acehnese ethnonationalism was formed due to the sentiments of the Acehnese people towards the centralized Indonesian government. Acehnese ethnic groups have experienced various disappointments since they joined as part of Indonesia. Several issues that are of concern to the GAM struggle are injustice, unequal distribution of welfare, government domination by ethnic Javanese, and serious human rights violations during the Aceh conflict. This situation led to the formation of GAM, which aims to separate itself from Indonesia (Apipudin, 2016; Brown, 2005; Ishak, 2000; Sari et al., 2022; Sari, 2020). During the Aceh conflict, the ideology of ethnonationalism was taught in military training attended by GAM members. This has caused this ideology to become deeply rooted, and even GAM members are willing to sacrifice their lives to achieve the movement's goals (Sari et al., 2019).



However, after the signing of the MoU in Helsinki, a fundamental change in the conditions of peace and conflict occurred in Aceh and for the GAM organization itself. The agreement does not only require GAM to lay down its arms. GAM combatants had to think about new strategies to transform the political, economic, life, and even ideological struggle (Barter, 2011; Prasojo et al., 2006; Stange & Patock, 2010). The Helsinki MoU has provided an opportunity for GAM to integrate into society and form local political parties. The aim is to support former combatants' efforts to achieve social and economic integration with the rest of society. After disarmament/disarmament and demobilization, the reintegration program is expected to enable former combatants to rediscover their civilian lifestyle. As a result, several GAM elites changed professions by forming local Acehese parties and participating in elections in Indonesia.

The demand for GAM is to change its struggle model from an armed war to a war of political competition through formal political mechanisms and processes and formal political institutions. Changing the pattern of struggle is, of course, not easy, considering that the pattern of armed physical struggle has been carried out for a long time (Hillman, 2012).

In the first regional head elections (PILKADA) held in Aceh in 2006, the local Aceh party affiliated with former GAM combatants won the elections (Andriyani, 2017; Prasojo et al., 2006). As a result, they began to occupy the Aceh government and indirectly accepted Indonesian nationalism. Apart from that, the GAM elite's involvement in the realm of government is so that they can control the points of the MoU that have been agreed upon so that they can be realized well. DPRK chairman Bireuen RUsyidi Mukhtar said in a direct interview.

“GAM continues to encourage its representatives in the legislature to follow up on what has been included in the MoU so that everything can be realized. That is the function of elite GAM combatants in the government; the important thing is not to forget yourself and your function.” (interview 16 April 2020)

Teungku Batee, a GAM commander in the Batee Ilikek region, said that after peace, the GAM combatants returned to the Republic of Indonesia (RI) and entered the government structure. The former GAM seemed to have lost its ideology, direction, and spirit, and the initial goal stated after peace, namely prosperity for the people of Aceh, was just a breath of fresh air; the GAM elites who were already in government only thought about their personal and group profits. This is a few quotes from a direct interview with Teungku Batee:

“...After these elites entered government, their interests became greater than the GAM's interest. If policies are made to benefit the former GAM, they will not get anything...” (interview 27 June 2020).

The excerpt of the interview explained that after peace, former GAM combatants returned to the arms of the Republic of Indonesia (RI) and entered the Party structure. They (ex-GAM) seemed to have lost their ideology and direction. After peace, the former GAM formed the Aceh Transition Committee (KPA). The aim is to oversee the implementation of the demobilization and reintegration of former GAM combatants and also as a forum for GAM combatants in terms of distributing information to GAM cadres to strengthen their position within the executive. It is hoped that this institution's presence can accelerate the political transformation process of GAM's strength. The Aceh Transitional Committee (KPA) structure is not much different from when GAM was still carrying out armed struggle. At the Bireuen district level itself, the chairman of the KPA is the former GAM commander in the Batee Illiek region, namely Teungku Darwis Jeunib.

There were differences of opinion regarding nationalism within GAM, namely elite and non-elite groups. What is meant by the elite group consists of former GAM combatants who are in the government, GAM leaders, and GAM commanders. Meanwhile, what is

meant by non-elite groups are GAM soldiers and former GAM combatants who are not in the government. After the GAM and RI peace agreement, Indonesian nationalism has successfully influenced former GAM combatants and some GAM elites to serve body and soul for the Republic of Indonesia in the name of one Indonesian nation and homeland. The chart above shows differences in views regarding nationalism from the two groups of former GAM combatants, namely the GAM elite and non-elite groups.

The author tries to separate the nationalist perspective of former elite GAM combatants from the nationalist perspective of non-elite former GAM combatants. This is because, based on the findings in the field and the author's analysis, there is an internal vertical conflict within the GAM group regarding the nationalist perspective. GAM from the elite group said that current GAM combatant nationalism is dynamic, meaning that the nationalism of former GAM combatants depends on how the center treats the Acehese people and the realization of the MoU points. Meanwhile, from the perspective of former non-elite GAM combatants, they say they still want independence but are forced to become nationalists; this is not unfounded because there is a very high sense of disappointment with the GAM elite within government circles after peace.

Another finding from this research is that there are five factors in the ideological transformation process of the post-peace Free Aceh Movement, including the peace factor, profit orientation factor, comfort, disappointment, and compulsion factor, which the author will explain below:

### *3.2.1. Peace Factor*

After the peace agreement was signed, GAM required to transform from an armed rebel group into an ordinary civil society, changing ideology and the order of social life. Ideology is more than just a belief for individuals; it is also a shared affiliation that can unite movements with the same thoughts. Mobilization movements are often divided by debate and ideological understanding when goals and strategies are changed. The interaction of movement, public, countermovement, and authority actors often creates the concept of an ideology. The concept of ideology also provides information and mobilizes society. Ideology as an action perspective emphasizes ideological power to limit collective action (Zald, 2000).

### *3.2.2. Profit orientation Factors*

The profit orientation factor also plays an essential role in changing the ideology of GAM combatants in Bireuen Regency. After the peace, the GAM elite began to carry out political dynamics at the local level in seizing power in Aceh (Struggle for power), which was a fundamental form of transformation for GAM combatants. This effort to seize power was proven in the simultaneous regional elections on 11 December 2006; of the 21 seats contested by the GAM group, they got eight seats. The definition of Marxist ideology states that ideology is an abstract system of thought, not just the formation of an idea that is then applied to public problems, thus making the concept the core of politics. Political thought implicitly follows an ideology even though it is not laid out as an explicit system.

GAM elites have carried out a power struggle and succeeded in occupying the government sphere as council members, regents, and governors. In the context of bureaucracy and government, they can be massively involved. Meanwhile, combatants or other elites outside the government stage are venturing into project tenders because all project tender processes must involve them directly or indirectly.

### *3.2.3. Convenience Factor*

Comfort comes from the profit orientation obtained after peace and the transformation into Indonesian nationalism. It cannot be denied that the people of Aceh are increasingly comfortable with the current situation and conditions. Every year, the GAM elite still expresses ethno-nationalism in terms of completing the terms of the MoU as a mere

celebration to get public attention. In an interview, the author with one of the GAM commanders in the Bireuen Regency area said that it is true that the GAM elites who are now in government circles have abandoned their ideology because of the comfort, power, and material things they have obtained in the current situation.

Ideology is an essential aspect of social and political movements. The most basic and generally held view of ideology is that ideology is a system of multiple beliefs, ideas, values, principles, ethics, morals, and goals that overlap and strengthen each other. The concept of ideology is also an articulated belief and a movement feature implicit in problems of social action (Swidler, 1986).

### 3.2.4. *Compulsion and Disappointment Factors*

Compulsion and disappointment also played a significant role in the ideological transformation of GAM combatants, especially those from non-elite circles. After peace, GAM still adhered to a command system where GAM elites began to transform into government and began to accept Indonesian nationalism. Other GAM combatant members also followed the orders of their higher-ups and forced them to return to the bosom of the Indonesian motherland. Ideology becomes a tool of social control where beliefs and values are widely shared and maintained by elites to legitimize their authority and weaken the opposition or opposing parties.

## 4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Aceh's ethnonationalist ideology has become the driving force for GAM's struggle. During the conflict, Acehese ethnonationalism was derived from the doctrines conveyed by GAM leaders to their members during military training. Aceh's ethnonationalist ideology has become so deeply rooted in GAM's followers that they are willing to do anything to fight for their movement. However, after the signing of the Helsinki Peace Agreement of MoU in 2005, several significant changes occurred. The Peace Agreement has allowed former GAM to form a local Acehese political party to compete in Indonesia's national elections. In the first regional election in Aceh, it turned out that a local political party affiliated with GAM won the election and took control of the Aceh government. This situation applies to Bireuen, one of GAM's main base areas.

The joining of former GAM in the Aceh government has caused the ideology of Acehese ethnonationalism that they have upheld so far to fade. Within the framework of the Indonesian republican government, former GAM (especially elites with government positions) have accepted Indonesian nationalism. This study found that The ideological transformation of former GAM combatants after the Helsinki MoU in Bireuen Regency was influenced by several factors, the most important of which was the peace factor, the second was the profit orientation factor of the GAM elite, and the comfort factor obtained after peace and having power. Then, on the part of the former non-elite GAM combatants, an ideological transformation occurred due to the compulsion and disappointment felt by the non-elite GAM group towards the elite GAM group.

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