

Aceh's Crescent and Star Flag: Negotiation of Collective Identity in Post-conflict Aceh VS Indonesia

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Abstrak

Tulisan ini menganalisis negosiasi identitas masyarakat Aceh pasca konflik dengan studi kasus diskursus Bendera Bintang Bulan atau (Bendera Aceh). Tulisan berfokus menelusuri proses negosiasi identitas kolektif Aceh sebagai mana tercermin dalam diskursus Bendera Bintang Bulan; dan sejauhmana efektifitas penetapan Bendera Aceh sebagai strategi reformulasi identitas kolektif pasca konflik. Tulisan berikut menggunakan pendekatan sosio-antropologi. Lokasi penelitian adalah empat wilayah di Aceh, yakni Banda Aceh, Aceh Timur, Langsa, dan Aceh Tengah. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan observasi, wawancara semi terstruktur dan studi dokumentasi. Wawancara semi terstruktur dilakukan terhadap elite politik di Aceh dari kelompok yang pro dan kontra Bendera Bulan Bintang, maupun representasi pemerintah pusat di Jakarta. Studi dokumentasi dilakukan dengan menelusuri pemberitaan media massa seputar topik yang menjadi masalah penelitian. Tulisan ini menyimpulkan bahwa keragaman respon masyarakat Aceh dalam merespon penetapan Bulan Bintang sebagai bendera Aceh merupakan cerminan keragaman masyarakat Aceh baik secara sosial politik maupun kebudayaan yang sedang melakukan pencarian format identitas kolektif pasca konflik.

Kata kunci: Aceh, Bendera Bulan Bintang, Negosiasi Identitas

Abstract

The following article analyzes the post-conflict Aceh identity negotiation based on the case study of Aceh's Crescent and Star Flag also known as the Aceh's Flag. The paper focuses on tracing the process of collective Aceh identity negotiations as reflected in Aceh's Crescent and Star Flag discourse, and to the extent of the effectiveness of the establishment of the Aceh flag as a strategy for reformulating the collective identity after the conflict. The following article uses a socio-anthropological approach. The research locations are four regions in Aceh, Banda Aceh, East Aceh, Langsa, and Central Aceh. Semi-structured interviews were conducted against the political elite in Aceh from the pro- and anti-Flag of the Crescent and Star, as well as the central government in Jakarta. Documentation studies were carried out by scrutinizing mass media reports on topics that became research issues. The paper concludes that the diversity of responses of the Aceh community in response to the establishment of the Crescent and Star as the flag of Aceh is a reflection of the social and political and cultural diversity that Aceh society is seeking to form a post-conflict collective identity.

Keywords: Aceh, Crescent and Star flag, Identity negotiation

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INTRODUCTION

The people of Aceh during 2013 are quite dynamic in the fight for the Crescent and Star flag to be recognized by the central government as the formal Aceh's flag next to the Red and White flag (Arabiyan, 2018b, pp. 198–199; Ridwansyah, 2018).

The existence of Aceh's flag has been regulated in the MoU of Helsinki. A clause of the peace agreement between the Indonesian government and the Aceh Liberation Movement (GAM) mentions that the people of Aceh is entitled to have its own flag as an expression of identity and privileges of Aceh (Arabiyan, 2018a, pp. 296–310; Kingsbury, 2007). However, during the reign of the previous governor, Irwandi Yusuf, the clause regarding Aceh's flag received less attention. After nearly a year of former GAM activists, Zaini Abdullah and Muzakir Manaf won the gubernatorial election in Aceh, determination of Aceh's Flag becomes the priority agenda. In March 2013, the people of Aceh Legislative Council (DPRA) which is dominated by the representatives of the Aceh Party agreed to verify a Qanun on Aceh's flag.

The following study will explore the reproduction process of symbolic identity in Aceh, as reflected in the discourse of the Crescent and Star flag. Firstly, this article discusses the process of symbolic identity formation associated with the controversy over Qanun's of the flag of Aceh Number 3/2013. Secondly, the author also explores the reaction of the Aceh community to the dynamics.

The data used in the study was collected in the period 2012-2013 at four areas in Aceh, namely Banda Aceh, North Aceh, Aceh Singkil, and Langsa. The four regions are selected based on at least two considerations. The first consideration, because these land areas at certain levels represent the diversity of socio-political identity of Aceh. At least this is reflected in the legislative election results 2009 for the district and the city. Based on the acquisition of legislative seats, it was revealed that Banda Aceh was the region which was won by the Democratic Party (8 seats) with a second place is occupied by Aceh Party (6 seats). Reversely, Aceh Party won a landslide in North Aceh (32 seats), while in Singkil Golkar Party won (6 seats) and the Aceh Party only get one seat. Langsa, over the years this area won by Golkar Party, but the 2009 election Aceh Party won (6 seats) although the difference is very thin with Democratic Party (4 seats). Judging from the winners of the district and city elections during 2012, North Aceh won by Aceh Party, Banda Aceh was controlled by the mayor of the Democratic Party, Golkar Party controlled Singkil and Langsa which had always been controlled by Golkar party but at local elections of 2012 the Aceh Party emerged as the winner. These data hopefully is able to illustrate the socio-political diversity of the region which is the focus of this study.

The second reason is the diversity of the response of the people in the region towards the validation of Crescent and Star flag by DPRA by the early 2013. Banda Aceh as the capital of Aceh province showed mixed response in the society, despite the vote in favor of the establishment of Crescent and Star flag relatively dominant. As for the other regions which were selected as the focus of this study showed different responses. North Aceh showed a landslide of support to the Crescent and Star flag, while Singkil showed the opposite attitude: refused and stated that they only recognize the White and Red flag. This is visible in the demonstrations conducted by the society of respective regions. Along with the issue of the flag, Singkil was one of the active voices for the partition from the province.

Apart from Aceh Singkil and North Aceh, Langsa people showed a varied and eclectic response. In Langsa, there are at least three kinds of demonstration, those

are the act that raise the White and Red flag and at the same time rejected the Crescent and Star flag, the act that raise only the Crescent and Star flag, and the act that raise both flags side by side. The locations of the research chosen based on the diversity of the factual demonstration in responding the existence of Crescent and Star flag hopefully will benefit the identification of various interpretations of the decisive elite in Aceh deal with the existence of Crescent and Star flag.

The fact about the diversity of dominant ethnic in respective regions becomes the further consideration in choosing the research location. According to Muhammad Hasan Ansori, ethnically, Banda Aceh is the territory in which the composition of sub-ethnic is most varied; those are the ethnic of Aceh, Kluet, Gayo, Singkil, Tamiang and Aneuk Jamee. This is sensible since Banda Aceh is the capital city of Aceh province. Meanwhile, North Aceh, the majority of its people are Aceh ethnic with a handful of immigrants from Java, Padang, Batak and China. While Aceh Singkil is inhabited by majority of Singkil ethnic, only small portion of the population are Aceh ethnic. As for Langsa, majority of its population are Aceh ethnic but the number of non-Aceh ethnic is fairly balancing the number of Aceh ethnic, which is consisted of Java, Batak, Minang, Tamiang, etc. Ansori reduced the trend of ethnical population in the four territories as follow: Banda Aceh (non-ethnic territory), North Aceh (ethnic territory), Singkil (non-ethnic territory), and Langsa (ethnic territory) (Ansori, 2012, p. 27). The selection of the four regions as the research location is expected to be useful to the account of research question.

The significance of the research is to explain the Identity fragmentation in contemporary Aceh, especially after the Helsinki peace treaty. Aceh as non-monolithic community has attracted much attention of academics (Ansor, 2016; Kingsbury, 2006, 2007; Salim, 2010, 2018; Zulkarnaini et al., 2022). Various perspectives have been used to strengthen this argument. The following research will utilize the discourse of Crescent and Star flag as an instrument to analyze the fragmentation pattern of contemporary Aceh identity and the context of socio-politics, economics and culture that surround it. The research is also useful to show however tough the effort to uniform the identity in Aceh through the means of political approach get varied responses from the society itself, both support and resistance (Ansor, 2014a; Ansor & Amri, 2020; Febriandi & Amri, 2021; Ichwan, 2021; Nirzalin & Febriandi, 2022). Support and resistance of the society is expressed through various forms, ranging from symbolic action, contestation of meaning, various demonstrations or other collective action (Ansor, 2006). Associated with resistance, calls for secession by a group who advocates on behalf of the establishment of Aceh Lauser Antara province would be seen as a political response to the idea of the uniformity. Through this study it is expected to reveal the forms of fragmentation of Acehnese identity, ideology, and the impact of political uniformity for the future of the community of the province.

METHOD

The research is a qualitative one with the use of socio-anthropology approach (Connolly, 2001; Feola, 2016). Through this approach the researcher tried to study

socio-politics by presenting view of life of the subject investigated (Spradley, 1979). The process of recording and interpreting others' way of life itself is what called as the work of ethnography, a variant in socio-anthropology approach (Bowen, 2012; Geertz, 1973). Through this approach, the phenomenon of contestation of interpretation over the existence of Crescent and Star flag will be described and analyzed in its interconnectivity frame with other social phenomenon consisting of socio-politics, economics, and culture that surround the related decisive elite. The researcher tried to explain the cosmology of political thought of the decisive elites in Aceh in understanding the Crescent and Star flag for Aceh by analyzing the whole social process which is believed to influence this understanding.

The source of the data in this research is categorized into two, primary data and secondary. The primary data is the data collected through the process of observation, interviews or exploration of documents relevant to the subject. In relation with the technique of collecting the data through observation (Emerson et al., 2001), the researcher will conduct the observation over the daily phenomenon which is believed to have been related with the articulation over the validation of the Crescent and Star flag as the formal flag of Aceh beside the White and Red. In this case, the researcher conducted the observation over the demonstrations, meetings or gatherings as well as other phenomenon that related to research question.

Furthermore, associated with the interviews (Spradley, 1979), the researcher met politicians in legislative council and political party, decisive elites in bureaucracy, leaders of civil society organization, leaders of ethnic groups in the four regions where the research is conducted. Specially in Singkil researcher also interviewed the leaders of pro-division of the provinces of Aceh Lauser Antara, because their movement is believed to be the resultant of ratification discourse of Crescent and Star flag. Here, researchers will explore their views related to the research problem.

It should be mentioned that the researcher conducted in-depth interviews. Researcher interviewed the informants through unstructured interviews. Other interviews were conducted in the form of conversation flowing but focused on the theme required for this research. Interviewing techniques are also performed elastic, both the pattern of personal and group interviews. This is done with the consideration that both techniques are believed to have advantages and disadvantages in exploring the data needed. Group interview technique adopted depends on the conditions that allow obtaining maximum information.

The collection of data through documentation approach is primarily used to collect materials related to past events that have been documented, either in the form of photographs, drawings, mass media publications, or other books. For just additional information, the mass media that will be targeted include local and national scale media. These documents are expected to complete the necessary data related to this study. This technique is important to be taken because there are so many events that describe the contestation of meaning and negotiation of Aceh identity that occurred before the study was conducted.

Data collection techniques as described above generate qualitative data. Researcher processed the data from the beginning of scripting the observation,

interview or recording, editing, classifying, reducing and, furthermore, presenting data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As for the data analysis technique is concerned, the technique used is qualitative-naturalistic data analysis. Huberman and Miles said that the analysis process consists of three sub-processes that are interrelated, data reduction, data presentation and drawing conclusion or verification. This process is performed before the data collection phase, exactly at the time of determining the study design and planning; during the process of temporary data collection and initial data analysis; and after the final data collection phase (Huberman & Milles, 2009, p. 592). In this research we analyzed the data based on the interaction of those four main components.

Data collection, as has been stated is done through observation, interview and documentation. Field data recorded in the form of descriptive notes on what is seen, heard what had happened and what had been found from the field as it is without comment or interpretation of the researcher about the phenomenon encountered. Therefore, while in the field, the researcher made field notes descriptively related to the research problem. Based on these data the researcher then make a note of reflection and commentary on the phenomenon in the field. This reflective note is the temporary assessment of the facts found in the field.

The next process is to perform data reduction. Data reduction is defined as the process of selecting, screening, focusing on the simplification of the raw data obtained from field notes. Data reduction takes place continuously during the study. When researcher determines the obstruction of certain facts to be noted are basically researcher have carried out the data reduction process. Data reduction in other words, is a form of analysis that sharpens, classifies, directs, disposes of unneeded and organizes data required in accordance with the focus of the research problem. The presentation of data is done in the form of narrative text from field notes. Narrative texts of field records often confuse researchers if not sub-divided according to subject matter. Presentation of data is a stage of what is happening and what should be done next, for analysis and action taken as deemed necessary.

The series of important and integral in the process of data analysis is to verify and to conclude. Verification activities and the conclusion is actually only a part of sole activity and sole configuration, because the conclusion and initial verification throughout the study until the end of the study is a continuous and ongoing process. Verification and conclusion try looking for the meaning of the components presented by recording patterns of regularity, annotations, configuration, causality and research propositions. In conducting the verification and conclusion, revisiting the presentation of the data and field notes through discussions with colleague, as well as academicians who concerned with the problem of this research is an important part of the process of data analysis conducted by researcher.

Based on the above, the general analysis of research data is done through the stages as follows (Miles et al., 1992; Moleong, 2004). First, record all findings in the field phenomena through observation, interviews and documentation in the form of field notes. Second, review the record of observations, interviews and documentation as well as separate the important data and data that less important. This work was

repeated to check for possible classification errors. Third, describe the data that has been clarified, for the sake of further analysis with a focus attention and research purposes. Fourth, make a possible final analysis in the report to for the sake of this study. In a series like this the process of this activity was done.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Diverse perspectives and approaches used by researchers in tracing the construction of collective identity in Aceh: looking from the perspective of cultural articulation (Idria, 2016), gender relations (Afrianty, 2015b, 2015a; Grossmann, 2016), and relations between ethnic (Ansori, 2014b; Ichwan et al., 2020). Study of the Dutch anthropologist, Snouck Hurgronje entitled *The Acehnese* is an example of the research that reveal the construction of Acehnese identity based on the articulation of Islam and their culture. Hurgronje in his ethnographic work that has become a classic view, Acehnese identity characterized by a hybrid mixture between the elements of Islam and the customs of its people, despite the first-mentioned elements are always in a position to adjust to the second element. For Hugronje, being the Acehnese is synonymous with being a Muslim with a variant of Islam that is consistent with the dimensions of community mores (Hurgronje, 1906).

Other researchers saw the construction of Acehnese identity by using the analysis from the perspective of gender (Siapno, 2000, 2009). Siapno's research focus is women's political dynamics in Aceh, with the main focus transformation of Acehnese women's agency and power from woman representation in classical literature (manuscript) to the oral tradition in the reproduction of gender in the New Order era (Siapno, 2000). Research of Siapno reconstruct the identity transformation of women in Aceh of Indonesian classical period to contemporary times by placing the dynamics of the political landscape in the New Order as an analysis instrument.

Another researcher viewed the Acehnese identity construction based on the ethnic groups Identity network in Aceh as an instrument of analysis. The research was conducted by Ansori (2012). Ansori assessing the dynamics of the emergence of large-scale collective action in the Aceh conflict by associating the special identity of the Acehnese, which is the result of a creative interaction between Islamic identity, collective memory of Aceh history, and other local elements (Ansori, 2012). In conclusion, Ansori wrote, ethnic identity in Aceh at a certain level influenced the formation of collective action related to the purpose of the struggle of the people of Aceh during the conflict with the Indonesian government. However, he said further, ethnic identity is not a factor that directly triggers Acehnese resistance against the Indonesian government (Ansori, 2012).

On March 13, 2013, the legislative of Aceh endorsed a draft of Qanun stated that Aceh Movement emblem set as the Official Flag of the Province (Arabiyan, 2018b). Ratification is done by consensus; it showed the firm determination of the legislative elites to own a flag as the identity of Aceh province in addition to Red and White flag as a national identity. Legislative decision had the full support of the Governor, Zaini Abdullah, and Deputy Governor, Muzakir Manaf, who are also important figures in the Aceh Party.

Along with the ratification of Qanun deal with Aceh flag by DPRA, controversy arose. The Qanun on Aceh flag received a negative response from Indonesian government. Because the central government enacted the DPRA assess flag is considered to have significant similarities with the GAM flag. In fact, the peace clause of the Helsinki MoU, Aceh was allowed to have its own flag as far as the flag is not similar to the symbol of separatist movements. Therefore, the Indonesian government through the Ministry of the Interior requested that the DPRA conduct reviews of the Flag of the Aceh Qanun by changing the format of the flag of Aceh. But DPRA give cold response to the instructions of the Interior Ministry. Chairman of the DPRA, in interviews with various media and electronics said Crescent and Star flag is a fixed price and refused to do a review of the Qanun, because what have DPRA done is a follow-up of the Acehnese people aspiration.

The controversy surrounding the Aceh flag also occur in internal Aceh people. It is seen in some collective action through demonstrations conducted in several areas in Aceh. In Banda Aceh, Qanun on Aceh flag received a positive response as revealed in a demonstration and marches raising Crescent and Star flag. Similar actions are also carried out in various areas which are the basis of the Aceh Party like North Aceh, Bireun, Lhokseumawe, East Aceh and other areas.

On the contrary, in some other areas where the inhabitants do not affiliate to Aceh Party, public demonstrations and marches was held peacefully hoisting the flag of red and white as a response and rejection of Aceh flag. This phenomenon was found in some regions such as Southeast Aceh, Aceh Singkil, middle Aceh and other areas. The response of the communities in the regions was relatively harsh in responding the discourse of Aceh flag. The people in these regions march in protest against the ratification of the Crescent and Star as a Flag of Aceh accompanied by demands for secession from the province of Aceh if the DPRA did not reconsider their policy. In another area, in Southern Aceh, some local elites formed a committee for provincial division to declare Southern Aceh Province (ABAS) in response to the discourse of Aceh flag.

Meanwhile in Langsa, the community showed split response. At least the public response can be classified into three forms, the group that marched and raised the red and white flag, the group that marched and raised Crescent and Star flag, and the group that marched with both flags rose. An alliance of students and community of Langsa launched peaceful protest with hoisting a red and white flag and Aceh flag as well, although based on the monitoring of the researcher, the Aceh flag looks more in number. The demonstrators called on the government to understand that the adoption of a flag of Aceh by the DPRA is not intended as an expression of the desire to separate them from the central government, but rather to show the identity and unity of the people of Aceh.

The diversity of responses to the ratification of the Crescent and Star flag is a reflection of the diversity of identities and political ideologies of Aceh communities. When explored in more depth, the diversity of the people of Aceh in responding the presence of Crescent and Star flag congruent with the diversity of political identity of the society, at least it was seen in the number of votes a political party in the

elections of 2009. In the district where the Aceh Party got majority supporters, the collective action supporting the ratification of Aceh flag was eagerly found. Conversely, in areas where support for the Aceh Party is weak, collective action in rejecting Crescent and Star flag was found. Indeed there are some exceptions to the area where the party wins parliamentary elections, but the number is not significant, the public showed divided response.

Apart from that, the diversity of responses is also parallel to the dominant ethnic diversity in some districts/cities in Aceh. Muhammad Hasan Ansori classified districts in Aceh into two categories, namely ethnic territory (region-based Aceh ethnic), and non-ethnic territory (region with heterogeneous ethnic populations). According to him, out of 23 districts in Aceh, as many as 13 districts / cities are ethnically Aceh dominated areas (ethnic territory), while the other 12 counties categorized as a region with a population heterogeneous by ethnic. As for 13 districts/cities categorized as ethnic territory are East Aceh, West Aceh, Aceh Besar, Pidie, North Aceh, Bireun, South West Aceh, Aceh Jaya, Nagan Raya, Sabang, Lhokseumawe, Langsa and Pidie Jaya. While the 12 districts/cities categorized as non-ethnic territory are South Aceh, South East Aceh, Middle Aceh, Simeulu, Aceh Singkil, Gayo Luwes, Aceh Tamiang, Bener Meriah, Banda Aceh and Subulussalam (Ansori, 2012). In the area of ethnic territory, the support of Crescent and Star flag looks striking. Moreover in most areas classified as non-ethnic territory, people respond passively to the ratification of the Crescent and Star flag, while most other regions showed strong resistance. These areas actively refuse the endorsement of Crescent and Star flag even actively provoke the claims of division from the province.

Not all elements of the local populace have same historical consciousness of the Crescent and Star flag. For most people in Aceh, Crescent and Star flag is a symbol of the struggle of the people, while others interpret it as the symbol of separatist group. Rejection of some areas on the Crescent and Star flag to be endorsed as Aceh flag is estimated strongly based on the feelings that Crescent and Star flag as the historical continuity of the Aceh Liberation Movement does not represent the historical consciousness of those who in a period of movement did not give their full support for GAM (Aceh Liberation Movement). As seen in the public space, identity conflict and contestation of meaning to the idea of the establishment of the Crescent and Star as a flag of Aceh is empirical phenomena that are coloring the days of people in the province.

The central government assesses the Crescent and Star flag as a symbol of the Aceh separatist movement (Schulze, 2004; Smith, 2015; Stange & Patock, 2010; Utama, 2019; Wahyudi, 2013), and hence the determination of the Crescent and Star as a Flag of Aceh is in conflict with applicable law. The central government has asked the government to revise the flag of Aceh. In contrast, the Aceh Party saw that the Crescent and Star flag has the potential to mobilize the masses for the elections in 2014; to them it is not a symbol of Acehnese separatism. This is because as it was stated in the MoU of Helsinki, Aceh has fully recognized the sovereignty of Indonesia, and have decided to become part of the Republic of Indonesia.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono faced a difficult situation. On the one hand, he sees the achievement of his administration to establish peace in Aceh is a hard job that must be maintained, and therefore he does not want to establish confrontation with the elite of politicians in Aceh, especially the former Aceh Liberation Movement exponent; but on the other hand, the state also did not want him to be labeled as less nationalistic to permit and legalize the flag assessed by Indonesian people as a symbol of the separatist movement. Indonesian President and his political advisors estimate, if the central government allowed Aceh to have its own flag which is identical to the separatist movement, the separatist movement in Papua will also demand the enactment of the Morning Star flag of the province.

The process of talks between the central government and the government of Aceh run tough. Up to now there is no agreement between the central government and the government of Aceh for the future of the Crescent and Star flag. Various positive developments is the fact that the all parties wanted the problem of Crescent and Star flag can be solved peacefully, and to avoid the mass provocation that will revive the atmosphere of conflict in Aceh.

CONCLUSION

For some people of Aceh, the Crescent and Star flag is a symbol of the struggle of Aceh to determine the identity and dignity of the people of Aceh. For a long time the Crescent and Star was also a symbol that united Acehnese identity in a collective consciousness of Aceh. Therefore, for the elites in Aceh and the various components of the Acehnese, the symbolic power of this flag needs to be institutionalized through regulations that specifically regulate the flag of Aceh. The institutionalization of Acehnese identity through the adoption of a flag itself is basically also a mandate of the Helsinki MoU between the Indonesian government and the Aceh Liberation Movement. The study also found that the community had a mixed response to the presence of the Crescent and Star flag: the majority of populations were supporting and some others refused the determination of Crescent and Star flag as the flag of Aceh. Although it is not always linear with the name of the region, but it is seen that the solid support for the determination of the Crescent and Star flag as the flag of Aceh came from ethnic territory or the areas with a majority Aceh ethnic. But the highlands of Aceh, such as Gayo, Alas and the like, showing rejection of the determination of the Crescent and Star flag as the flag of Aceh.

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