



The 1999 Aceh Referendum Discourse: A Historical Analysis of Acehnese Aspirations

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Abstract

The Aceh referendum discourse in 1999 emerged as a significant political movement that reflected the collective aspirations of the Acehnese people amid prolonged conflict and strained relations between Aceh and the Indonesian central government. The discourse gained momentum following widespread dissatisfaction with political marginalization, economic inequality, and allegations of human rights violations during the Military Operations Area (DOM) period. This study aims to analyze the historical development of the Aceh referendum discourse and identify the factors that contributed to its failure. This research employs a qualitative approach by integrating historical methods with oral history. Data was collected through interviews with individuals involved in the referendum movement and were supported by literature reviews, archival materials, and official documents. These sources were critically analyzed to reconstruct historical events and interpret the dynamics surrounding the referendum movement. The findings indicate that the referendum discourse was rooted in long-standing historical grievances and evolved into a broad social movement supported by students, civil society organizations, and sections of the Acehnese community. Despite gaining significant public support, the movement failed to achieve its objectives due to limited political preparedness, the absence of a clear constitutional and legal framework, concerns regarding national disintegration, and strong resistance from the central government. The study contributes to the fields of political history, democracy, and conflict resolution by providing a deeper understanding of how local political aspirations interact with state interests. It also offers insights into the challenges faced by self-determination movements within a unitary state system.

Keywords: Aceh Referendum, Public Aspiration, Self-Determination, Oral History, Conflict Resolution

Introduction

Referendums are one of the mechanisms of direct democracy that enable citizens to participate directly in political decision-making concerning collective interests. In political science, a referendum is understood as a voting process through which citizens express their views on important issues, particularly those related to constitutional changes, territorial boundaries, or the determination of a region's political status. Therefore, referendums are often regarded as the highest manifestation of popular sovereignty because they allow citizens to participate beyond



the representative democratic mechanisms exercised through elected institutions (Heywood, 2013; Marie-Isabel Theuwis, 2025).

However, in practice, referendums are not merely technical instruments of democracy but are also closely associated with power relations, national political configurations, and state strategic interests. Previous scholarly works have emphasized that referendum demands often emerge in contexts of political dissatisfaction and contested governance (Aspinall, 2009; Reid, 2004). In many cases, such demands reflect broader struggles over self-determination in regions with strong historical identities and conflict legacies (United Nations, 1945). Consequently, referendums are frequently linked to the principle of self-determination, particularly in regions characterized by a history of conflict, strong cultural identities, and complex relationships with central governments. From the perspective of international law, the right to self-determination is not always interpreted as the right to secede from an existing state, but may also be realized through forms of internal self-determination within an existing sovereign framework (Emeka C. Adibe, 2022; van der Vyver, 2004).

This study is informed by the theories of political participation and elite bargaining. Political participation theory emphasizes that citizens possess the right to express their aspirations and influence political decision-making processes. In the Aceh case, the demand for a referendum represented a form of collective political participation through which society sought to determine its political future. Furthermore, the concept of elite bargaining helps explain why broad public support for a referendum did not necessarily translate into political realization. Political outcomes in conflict-affected regions are often shaped by negotiations among political elites and state actors rather than solely by popular demands. These perspectives provide an analytical framework for understanding both the emergence of referendum aspirations and the factors that contributed to their eventual failure.

In the Indonesian context, Aceh represents one of the regions where demands for a referendum were most prominently articulated. Historically, Aceh has possessed a distinctive social, cultural, and political identity and has long been recognized for its tradition of resistance against external authority. From the colonial era to the post-independence period, relations between Aceh and the central government were frequently characterized by political tensions. These tensions intensified during the New Order regime, particularly following the implementation of the Military Operations Area (Daerah Operasi Militer/DOM) policy between the late 1980s and 1998. This period was marked by numerous human rights violations that generated collective trauma and reinforced public distrust toward the state.

The political transformation following the collapse of the New Order regime in 1998 created new opportunities for the expression of political aspirations. The Reformasi era, characterized by expanded civil and political freedoms, enabled Acehnese society to openly voice their aspirations, including demands for a referendum as a mechanism of self-determination. The movement reached its peak on 8 November 1999, when more than one million Acehnese gathered peacefully at the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque to demand the implementation of a referendum. This event represented a significant historical moment, demonstrating that the demand for a referendum was not confined to political elites or specific groups but had evolved into a broad-based civil society movement.

Previous studies have examined the Aceh conflict from various perspectives. Reid (2004) explored the relationship between conflict, peace, and the burden of historical memory in Acehnese society, while Aspinall (2009) analyzed the dynamics of separatism and nationalism in the Aceh conflict. Other studies have focused on the role of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), human rights violations, and the peace process that culminated in the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (Latif et al., 2020; Yanuardi et al., 2022; Zainal et al., 2022). Nevertheless, studies that specifically examine the referendum discourse as a form of collective political aspiration from a historical perspective remain limited. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the historical formation of the Aceh referendum aspiration in 1999 and to examine the factors that contributed to its failure within the broader context of Indonesia's national political dynamics. Specifically, this study addresses two research questions: (1) How did the Aceh referendum aspiration emerge and develop as a political movement in 1999? and (2) What factors contributed to the failure of the referendum movement within Indonesia's post-Reformasi political context? By addressing

these questions, this study seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between local aspirations and national policies while enriching scholarly discussions on democracy, conflict, and political resolution in Indonesia.

In this study, the term “referendum discourse” refers to the collective political and public articulation of demands for a referendum as a mechanism to determine Aceh’s political future within the Indonesian state. The concept of “self-determination” is understood as the right of a people to determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development, which may be exercised either through internal arrangements within an existing state or through other internationally recognized political pathways. Meanwhile, “political aspiration” refers to collective societal demands that emerge in response to perceived political, economic, or social injustices.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section presents the research methodology and sources used in this study. This is followed by a historical overview of the emergence of the Aceh referendum discourse in 1999. The subsequent section analyzes the factors that contributed to the failure of the referendum movement. Finally, the study concludes by discussing the implications of the findings for political history, democracy, and conflict resolution in Indonesia.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach combined with the historical method and an oral history approach to examine the dynamics of the Aceh referendum aspirations in 1999. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables researchers to explore social phenomena in depth based on the perspectives and experiences of research subjects, thereby capturing the meanings underlying historical events and social action (Lexy J. Moleong, 2017; Sugiyono, 2017). In this study, the focus is not limited to reconstructing past events but also includes understanding the memories, experiences, and perspectives of individuals who directly participated in or witnessed the referendum movement. The historical method was applied through the stages of heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Gottschalk, 1986; Kuntowijoyo, 2003). Meanwhile, oral history was utilized to collect subjective narratives from historical actors and witnesses, allowing a more contextual and comprehensive understanding of the referendum movement (Thompson, 2000).

Data sources

This study utilized both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews with individuals who possessed direct knowledge or experience regarding the Aceh referendum movement, including activists, community figures, and individuals involved in activities related to the referendum movement. Informants were selected purposively based on their relevance, experience, and knowledge of the events under study. Secondary data were collected from books, academic journal articles, archives, official documents, reports, and other historical records related to the Aceh conflict, the referendum movement, and the political developments of the Reformasi period.

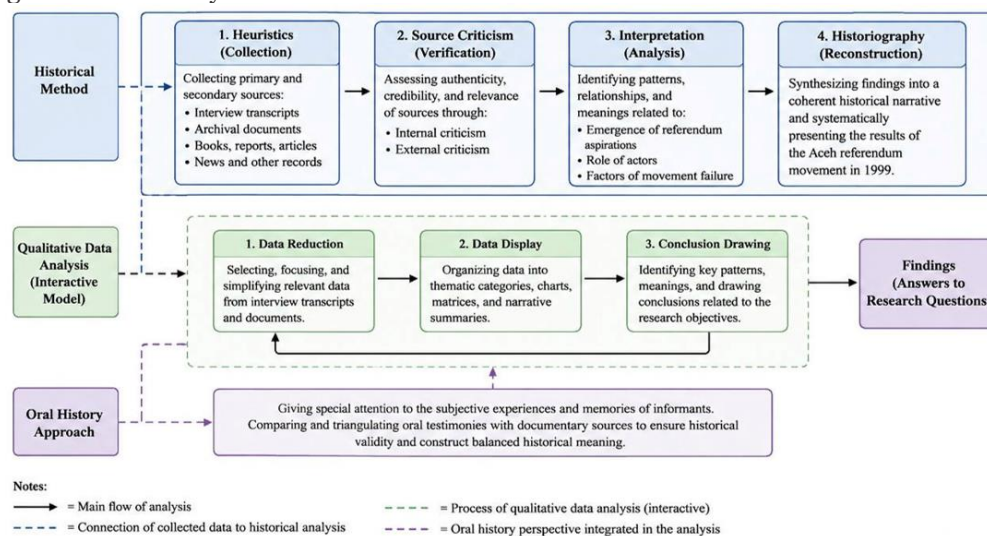
Data Collection and Procedure

Data collection was conducted through interviews, and document analysis. The research process began with a heuristic stage involving the identification and collection of relevant historical sources. Subsequently, informants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in or knowledge of the Aceh referendum movement. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted to obtain detailed narratives regarding the emergence of referendum aspirations, the role of various actors, and the factors that contributed to the movement’s failure. All interviews were conducted with the consent of the participants and were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Documentary sources were collected and reviewed to complement and verify information obtained from interviews (Thompson, 2000).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using both the historical method and a descriptive-analytical approach. Historical analysis involved four stages (Figure 1): heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography (Kuntowijoyo, 2003; Gottschalk, 1986). Source criticism was employed to assess the authenticity and credibility of historical evidence, while interpretation was used to identify relationships among historical facts and events. The final stage, historiography, involved the systematic reconstruction and presentation of historical narratives. Interview data were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing, following the interactive model of qualitative data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In the context of oral history, particular attention was given to the subjective experiences and memories of informants as part of the construction of historical meaning (Thompson, 2000).

Figure 1: Data Analysis Flow



Accuracy

To ensure data accuracy, information obtained from interviews was cross-checked with archival records, official documents, academic publications, and other relevant historical sources. Source criticism was applied to evaluate the reliability and consistency of information and to identify potential biases within both documentary and oral sources (Gottschalk, 1986; Kuntowijoyo, 2003).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was maintained through source triangulation and repeated examination of interview transcripts and documentary evidence. Information gathered from different sources was compared and verified to ensure the credibility, consistency, and dependability of the findings (Miles, Matthew B, 1994)

Ethical Review

This study adhered to ethical research principles throughout the research process. Prior to each interview, participants were informed about the objectives of the study and their voluntary involvement. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were given the right to decline answering questions they considered sensitive. All data collected were used solely for academic and research purposes.

Findings

Political Situation in Aceh at the End of the Twentieth Century

The political situation in Aceh at the end of the twentieth century was characterized by a tense relationship between local communities and the central government, shaped by the centralized political system of the New Order regime. Within this highly centralized system, regions were

often positioned merely as objects of policy, leaving limited space for local aspirations in the decision-making process. This condition became increasingly complex as Aceh, a region with a strong historical and political identity, was subjected to a pattern of state control that was both repressive and homogenizing, particularly through the dominance of the military, bureaucracy, and government political forces (Aspinall, 2009; Reid, 2004; Thompson, 2000)

The situation intensified following the implementation of the Military Operations Area (Daerah Operasi Militer or DOM) status in 1989, which transformed Aceh into a highly militarized region. Although this policy was initially intended to suppress the activities of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or GAM), in practice it expanded into broader control over civilian life. The dominant presence of the military created a social atmosphere characterized by fear, where people lived under constant pressure and surveillance. Fuad Mardhatillah explained that during this period, society experienced an abnormal condition in which security forces were present in almost every sphere of daily life, causing social activities and everyday routines to be carried out in an atmosphere of anxiety. This view was reinforced by Nasrul Sufi, who stated that people lived in a climate of fear and insecurity, and that social patterns were significantly altered by the prevailing security situation. One notable example can be seen in the *antar linto* tradition within Acehnese wedding customs, which had previously been commonly conducted at night but gradually shifted to daytime during the DOM period because people no longer felt safe engaging in activities after dark. According to Nasrul Sufi, this change can still be observed in contemporary Acehnese society, indicating that the impact of DOM extended beyond political and security issues to influence cultural practices and social life in the long term.

In addition to strengthening security control, the implementation of DOM also generated widespread human rights violations that profoundly affected Acehnese society (Amnesty International, 2003). Acts of violence, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and other forms of inhumane treatment, became part of the collective experience of the population. In an interview, Fuad Mardhatillah revealed that various forms of extreme violence were experienced by civilians, including physical torture, mutilation of victims' body parts, and other degrading forms of treatment. Furthermore, testimonies from various sources also referred to incidents of sexual violence committed against civilians during this period. These conditions not only caused physical suffering but also left deep psychological trauma, reinforcing the perception that the state functioned more as a source of threat than as a protector of its citizens.

Political tensions were also shaped by economic inequality experienced by the Acehnese people. Although Aceh was widely recognized as a region rich in natural resources, particularly oil and natural gas, the distribution of the resulting wealth was perceived as highly unequal. Most of the economic benefits were concentrated in the central government, while local communities experienced limited improvements in welfare. This situation intensified feelings of marginalization among the Acehnese population. Munawar Liza Zainal described inadequate development and infrastructure as a reality faced by Acehnese society despite the region's considerable economic potential. Similarly, Nasruddin Abu Bakar emphasized that inequalities in resource management constituted one of the key factors contributing to the emergence of political awareness among the people of Aceh.

These conditions were further reinforced by the repressive and closed nature of New Order politics. Within this system, the military, bureaucracy, and economic elites served as the primary pillars sustaining state power. State apparatuses, including civil servants, were directed to align themselves politically through support for Golongan Karya (Golkar), leaving little room for dissenting opinions. Fuad Mardhatillah explained that civil servants were institutionally encouraged to support Golkar, while criticism of the government had almost no opportunity to develop. This environment produced a restrictive political culture in which civil society lost much of its freedom to express political aspirations.

Therefore, the political situation in Aceh at the end of the twentieth century was shaped by the interaction of state violence, economic inequality, and a closed political system. The combination of these factors not only generated prolonged tensions but also fostered a collective consciousness among the Acehnese people to seek alternative and more democratic solutions to the conflict. It was within this context that the early foundations of political aspirations emerged, eventually developing into the referendum discourse that gained momentum in the late 1990s.

The Emergence of Referendum Aspirations in Aceh in 1999

The emergence of referendum aspirations in Aceh in 1999 cannot be separated from the concerns of young intellectuals who observed that the conflict and humanitarian situation in Aceh was deteriorating without any clear political solution (Baharuddin AR, 2012). In this context, the continuing violence involving both the state and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), as well as violence against civilians, encouraged the search for a more just and democratic alternative for conflict resolution. These aspirations developed as a response to the deadlock of the military approach that had long been employed, which was widely perceived as incapable of addressing the root causes of the conflict comprehensively.

At the initial stage, the idea of a referendum emerged within academic circles, particularly among students who actively participated in critical discussions concerning the situation in Aceh. Student groups from IAIN, SMUR, and Farmedia played an important role in formulating this discourse through intensive discussion forums. Fuad Mardhatillah explained that the referendum idea originated from a group of students who witnessed the escalating conflict without any accompanying alternative solution. Under such circumstances, a referendum was proposed as a political mechanism that would allow the people of Aceh to determine their own future directly through the principle of one person, one vote.

In addition to local realities, the referendum discourse was also influenced by international experiences. Fuad Mardhatillah revealed that his observation of the referendum process in Quebec, Canada, inspired the belief that political conflicts could be resolved through democratic mechanisms rather than violence. In political studies, a referendum is commonly understood as a form of direct democracy that provides citizens with the opportunity to make political decisions directly, thereby granting strong democratic legitimacy to the outcome.

This perspective was shared by Nasruddin Abu Bakar, who viewed the referendum as a democratic and constitutional means of providing space for the people to express their political aspirations. According to him, a referendum was not merely a choice between independence and remaining part of Indonesia; rather, it constituted a mechanism for testing the collective will of society in an open and transparent manner. In this regard, the referendum was understood as a political instrument capable of providing democratic and moral legitimacy to decisions made by the people themselves.

On the other hand, student movements played a significant role in articulating and disseminating the referendum discourse. Thamren explained that student organizations such as SMUR and various campus-based groups became pioneers in bringing the referendum issue into the public sphere. Initial actions took various forms, including the writing of slogans in public spaces, hunger strikes, and the dissemination of information through alternative media channels. These efforts formed part of a non-violent strategy aimed at raising political awareness among the public amid an environment characterized by pressure and uncertainty. From this perspective, the referendum represented not only a political idea but also a social movement that sought to transform the way society understood both the conflict and its possible resolution.

Therefore, the emergence of referendum aspirations in Aceh in 1999 was the result of an interaction between local experiences of injustice, the influence of global political ideas, and the active role of student movements in formulating and promoting the discourse. The referendum did not emerge as a spontaneous reaction; rather, it developed through a process of critical reflection on the prolonged conflict and as an attempt to offer a more peaceful and democratic alternative for resolving it. Within this context, the referendum gradually evolved into a political discourse that gained broad appeal among the Acehnese people.

The Process of Mass Mobilization and Referendum Orations in Banda Aceh

The development of referendum discourse in Aceh in 1999 did not remain confined to intellectual discussions but rapidly transformed into a social movement involving large-scale mass mobilization. This process began with the consolidation of student movements that sought to build collective public awareness through various non-violent strategies. Within the still repressive political environment of the post-New Order period, students played a crucial role as driving actors who bridged intellectual ideas with social realities on the ground.

The initial stage of mobilization was marked by the establishment of several forums for movement consolidation, one of which was the Congress of Acehese Students and Youth (Kongres Mahasiswa dan Pemuda Aceh Serantau – KOMPAS). This forum served as a meeting space for student groups from both within and outside Aceh to collectively formulate the direction of the movement. Through this forum, a referendum was agreed upon as the primary political demand to be promoted. Taufik Abda explained that the referendum movement developed through a systematic process, beginning with the formulation of ideas, followed by organizational consolidation and concrete actions in the field. In this context, KOMPAS functioned as an initial point of convergence that strengthened the legitimacy of the movement among Acehese students and youth.

The outcome of this consolidation was the establishment of the Aceh Referendum Information Center (Sentral Informasi Referendum Aceh – SIRA), which served as the main coordinating body for organizing the referendum movement. SIRA functioned not only as an organization but also as a symbol of unity among various student groups and civil society organizations that shared the same vision. Thamren emphasized that SIRA essentially acted as a collective movement network that brought together student organizations such as SMUR, KARMA, and Farmedia, thereby expanding the movement's reach across different segments of society. In this process, students served not only as intellectual actors but also as organizers who actively built networks and mobilized public support.

In addition to students and male political figures, the referendum movement also involved the active participation of women. Cut Asmaul Husna explained that women did not merely support the movement but were directly involved in various activities, including demonstrations, delivering speeches, preparing press releases, assisting displaced communities, and participating in decision-making forums within SIRA. Women also contributed to drafting speech materials used in referendum campaigns. This involvement demonstrates that the referendum movement was a collective endeavor that incorporated various elements of civil society, including women as active political actors.

As organizational consolidation strengthened, strategies for mass mobilization became increasingly open and visible. Initial actions included the dissemination of slogans in public spaces, the distribution of pamphlets, hunger strikes, and the use of alternative media to communicate information to the public. Thamren explained that the movement initially operated in a semi-underground manner due to the strong pressure exerted by security forces. Nevertheless, these efforts gradually succeeded in raising public political awareness, allowing the referendum discourse to gain wider recognition throughout Acehese society.

The mobilization reached its peak with the organization of the General Assembly of the Referendum Movement Community (Sidang Umum Masyarakat Pejuang Referendum – SUPR), which became a significant moment in demonstrating the collective strength of the Acehese people. The event functioned not only as a political forum but also as a public demonstration of mass support for the referendum demand. Fuad Mardhatillah explained that in 1999 approximately two million Acehese gathered around the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque and the Darussalam area to voice their support for a referendum. This event became one of the largest mass mobilizations in Aceh's history and demonstrated that the referendum discourse had evolved into a broad-based popular movement.

At the same time, prevailing social conditions significantly influenced the dynamics of mobilization. Nasrul Sufi explained that Acehese society lived under constant fear due to the prolonged conflict, leading many people to view a referendum as a pathway out of the ongoing crisis. In this context, mass participation was driven not only by political awareness but also by the desire for security and an end to violence. This helps explain why the referendum movement was able to attract such large-scale participation despite the considerable risks involved.

Beyond internal factors, the referendum movement also benefited from broader networks, including the involvement of the Acehese diaspora abroad. Munawar Liza Zainal explained that efforts were made to internationalize the Aceh issue through demonstrations and communication with various international actors. As a result, the referendum discourse became not only a local political issue but also one that attracted international attention. This support strengthened the position of the referendum movement by giving it a broader global dimension.

The involvement of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) also formed part of the mobilization process. Although there were initially differences in approach between civil society groups and GAM, in practice there were points of convergence that enabled both sides to support the referendum agenda. Nasrul Sufi explained that GAM's involvement in mass mobilization was limited, yet it still contributed to strengthening the movement on the ground. This illustrates that the referendum mobilization emerged from a complex interaction among various actors, including both civil society groups and resistance movements.

Therefore, the process of mass mobilization and referendum orations in Banda Aceh represented an important phase in the transformation of referendum discourse from an intellectual idea into a large-scale social movement. Through organizational consolidation, systematic mobilization strategies, and support from various segments of society, the movement successfully demonstrated the collective strength of the Acehnese people in expressing their political aspirations. This moment not only marked the peak of the referendum movement but also demonstrated the capacity of Acehnese society to organize itself openly and collectively in pursuit of its political rights.

The Failure of the Referendum Movement in Aceh in 1999

Although the referendum discourse in Aceh in 1999 successfully developed into a large-scale social movement and gained broad public support, it ultimately failed to materialize as a formal political policy. This failure cannot be understood as the result of a single factor, but rather as the outcome of a complex interaction between the movement's internal weaknesses and external pressures from the state. In this context, it is important to recognize that the ability to mobilize large numbers of people does not necessarily correspond to political preparedness or strategic effectiveness.

From an internal perspective, one of the movement's principal weaknesses was the absence of a clear and comprehensive plan regarding its direction after the referendum demand had been articulated. Nasruddin Abu Bakar emphasized that the referendum movement lacked a well-defined blueprint outlining the strategic steps to be taken should a referendum actually be implemented. This absence of planning caused the movement to lose direction when confronted with increasingly intense political pressure. Furthermore, fragmentation within the leadership structure and differences in strategy among various groups weakened organizational cohesion, preventing the formation of a unified command capable of responding effectively to changing political circumstances.

These internal weaknesses were further compounded by the movement's limited political preparedness. Thamren explained that although the referendum movement succeeded in raising mass political awareness, it was not strategically prepared to confront the complexities of national politics. In practice, the movement remained dependent on approval from the central government for the implementation of a referendum and lacked alternative strategies in the event that its demands were rejected. This indicates that the movement was stronger in terms of mobilization than in political negotiation and long-term strategic planning.

The failure of the referendum movement was also influenced by limitations in external networks and support. Nasrul Sufi emphasized that the movement did not possess sufficient international backing to exert pressure on the central government, thereby weakening its bargaining position both nationally and internationally. In addition, limited access to media and communication channels at the time constrained the dissemination of information in a broader and more systematic manner. As a result, the movement was unable to generate political pressure of sufficient magnitude beyond Aceh.

In addition to these internal challenges, the failure of the referendum movement was significantly shaped by external factors, particularly the position of the central government, which provided no political space for such demands. Within Indonesia's constitutional framework, the implementation of a referendum required a clear legal basis and approval from state institutions, neither of which materialized. Furthermore, the absence of common ground between the aspirations for independence that developed within segments of the Acehnese movement and the central government's commitment to preserving the territorial integrity of the Republic of Indonesia made the realization of a referendum increasingly difficult (Aspinall, 2018). The

government perceived the referendum demand as a threat to national unity, particularly within the fragile political environment of the post-Reformasi era (Kadir, 2015). Concerns regarding the possibility of national disintegration constituted one of the primary reasons for rejecting the referendum proposal in Aceh. These concerns were further reinforced by the recent independence of Timor-Leste, which led the central government to view the Aceh referendum movement as a potential threat to national integrity and as a precedent that could encourage separatist aspirations in other regions (Missbach, 2009). In subsequent developments, the government began promoting special autonomy as an alternative approach to conflict resolution in Aceh (Kirani, 2023).

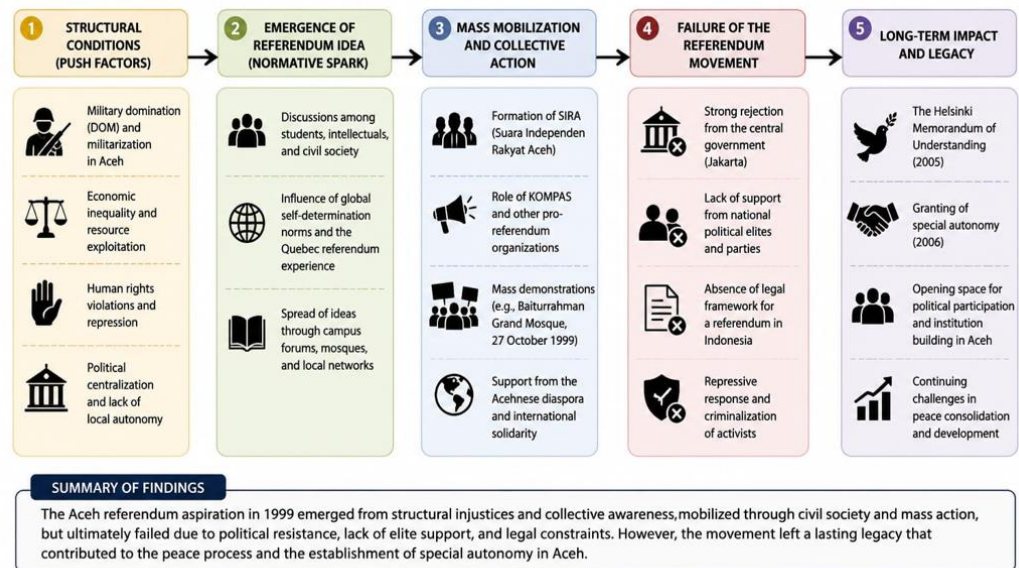
Although special autonomy was offered as an alternative solution, the policy initially failed to gain substantial support among Acehnese society. This was largely because the formulation of special autonomy was dominated by political elites and the central government, with limited participation from civil society groups and actors associated with the referendum movement (McGibbon, 2004)

The state's response to the referendum movement also became increasingly repressive as mass mobilization intensified and was perceived as a threat to political stability. Fuad Mardhatillah explained that while the movement was initially allowed a degree of space, repressive measures gradually emerged, including shootings targeting participants during subsequent demonstrations. Moreover, the referendum movement was frequently stigmatized as being associated with the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), causing it to be perceived as a security threat. This stigmatization not only strengthened the legitimacy of repressive actions but also weakened the movement's position in the eyes of the central government (Human Rights Watch, 2001). Reports by Amnesty International indicate that these repressive measures also targeted referendum activists and civilians in Aceh. One notable case involved the arrest of Muhammad Nazar, a leading figure of the Aceh Referendum Information Center (SIRA), who was detained following his involvement in referendum-related activities in Banda Aceh and reportedly experienced intimidation while in police custody (Amnesty International, 2000). These developments illustrate that the state viewed the referendum not merely as a political aspiration but also as a challenge to national stability and territorial integrity.

Another factor contributing to the failure of the referendum movement was the limited support it received from political elites, bureaucratic actors, and segments of community leadership. Fuad Mardhatillah revealed that support for the referendum largely originated from students and civil society groups, while bureaucratic elites tended to remain silent or refrained from expressing support openly due to prevailing political pressures. Consequently, the movement lacked the structural support necessary to influence policy change at the national level.

Therefore, the failure of the referendum movement in Aceh in 1999 can be understood as the result of an imbalance between social mobilization and political preparedness, combined with strong resistance from the state (Figure 2). While the movement succeeded in fostering collective political awareness among the Acehnese people (Figure 3), it failed to transform this social strength into an effective political force capable of influencing state policy. In this sense, the failure of the referendum movement reflects not only the movement's own limitations but also the restricted democratic space that existed during Indonesia's post-New Order political transition. Nevertheless, the dynamics generated by the referendum movement contributed to shifts in approaches to conflict resolution, which eventually culminated in the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and the enactment of Law No. 11 of 2006 on the Governance of Aceh, granting the province a special status within the framework of the Republic of Indonesia. In this context, the granting of special autonomy to Aceh after the Helsinki peace agreement may be understood as a form of internal self-determination, providing political space and recognition for Acehnese identity and interests while maintaining the territorial integrity of the Indonesian state.

Figure 2: Dynamics of the Aceh Referendum Movement in 1999



Source: Author's analysis based on research findings.

Figure 3: Public Gathering during Referendum Movement



Source: Nukilan (2024). 8 November 1999, Aceh Menuntut Referendum. <https://nukilan.id/8-november-1999-aceh-menuntut-referendum/>

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Aceh referendum discourse of 1999 emerged from a complex interaction of historical grievances, collective trauma, political exclusion, and demands for democratic participation. Interview evidence collected from Fuad Mardhatillah, Nasrul Sufi, Munawar Liza Zainal, Nasruddin Abu Bakar, Thamren, and Cut Asmaul Husna indicates that experiences of military domination during the DOM period, combined with perceptions of economic marginalization and restrictions on political expression, created conditions that encouraged the emergence of alternative political aspirations among the Acehese people.(Manan et al., 2021). These findings support previous arguments that political mobilization in conflict regions often develops not solely because of ethnic or nationalist sentiments but also as a response to prolonged experiences of injustice and unequal state–society relations (Reid, 2004; Aspinall, 2009). In this context, the referendum discourse represented an

attempt to obtain political recognition and a more democratic mechanism for resolving a longstanding conflict.

The emergence of referendum aspirations in Aceh also reflects broader theoretical discussions concerning political participation. According to political participation theory, citizens seek channels through which they can influence decisions affecting their collective future (Heywood, 2013). The findings reveal that students, intellectuals, and civil society organizations played a central role in transforming public dissatisfaction into organized political action. Testimonies from Fuad Mardhatillah and Thamren demonstrate that the referendum idea initially developed within student discussion circles before expanding into wider public mobilization. This finding is consistent with studies emphasizing the importance of civil society actors in expanding democratic participation during periods of political transition (Hellmeier & Bernhard, 2023). The Reformasi era provided a relatively more open political environment that enabled previously suppressed aspirations to be expressed publicly, allowing the referendum discourse to evolve into a mass movement.

Another important finding concerns the transformation of the referendum from an intellectual idea into a broad social movement. The establishment of KOMPAS and SIRA illustrates how political ideas require organizational structures to gain wider social support. Social movement studies suggest that successful mobilization depends not only on shared grievances but also on the ability of movement actors to construct collective identities and coordinate political action. The findings show that the Aceh referendum movement successfully developed networks linking students, community leaders, women's groups, and segments of the Acehnese diaspora. The large-scale mobilization that culminated in the 1999 gathering around the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque demonstrates the extent to which the referendum discourse succeeded in generating collective political consciousness among the Acehnese people.

The findings also highlight the significant role of historical memory in shaping political aspirations. Oral testimonies indicate that memories of military operations, human rights violations, and social insecurity continued to influence political attitudes long after the formal end of DOM. The experiences described by informants demonstrate that collective memories of violence became an important source of political consciousness among Acehnese society (Sierp, 2025). This finding supports Thompson's (2000) argument that oral history provides access to the ways communities construct historical meaning through memory and lived experience. In the Acehnese context, collective memories of suffering contributed to the formation of political narratives that legitimized demands for a referendum as a means of achieving justice and political recognition.

Despite the movement's ability to mobilize significant public support, the findings indicate that social mobilization alone was insufficient to achieve political objectives. This outcome can be better understood through the perspective of elite bargaining. While referendum supporters successfully generated public pressure, the implementation of a referendum ultimately depended upon decisions made by national political elites and state institutions. Aspinall (2018) argues that political outcomes in conflict regions are often determined through negotiations among elites rather than through popular mobilization alone. The findings support this argument, as informants repeatedly emphasized that the movement lacked sufficient political access and influence within national decision-making structures. Consequently, broad societal support cannot be translated into formal political policy.

The findings further reveal that the absence of a clear constitutional and legal framework significantly constrained the possibility of implementing a referendum in Aceh (Dwiputri Samsuerizal et al., 2021). Although democratic transitions often create opportunities for new political demands, such demands must still operate within existing legal and institutional structures. In Indonesia's post-Reformasi context, no constitutional mechanism existed to facilitate a referendum concerning regional political status. This institutional limitation strengthened the position of the central government, which consistently viewed the referendum proposal through the lens of national unity and territorial integrity. Concerns regarding national disintegration became particularly significant following the independence of Timor-Leste, leading policymakers to perceive the Aceh referendum as a potentially dangerous precedent for other regions.

The findings also illustrate the limitations of self-determination claims within established nation-states. International legal discussions concerning self-determination emphasize that the principle does not automatically grant a right to secession but may also be realized through internal political arrangements within an existing state (Taghizadeh Aydenloo et al., 2024). In the Aceh case, the central government rejected the possibility of an independence referendum but later accepted broader forms of political accommodation through special autonomy arrangements. This suggests that the conflict between self-determination and territorial integrity was ultimately managed through political negotiation rather than through a direct democratic referendum.

From a broader historical perspective, the significance of the referendum movement should not be measured solely by its inability to achieve its immediate objective. Although the referendum was never implemented, the movement contributed to important transformations in political discourse and conflict-resolution approaches in Aceh. The referendum movement succeeded in placing Acehnese grievances at the center of national political discussions and demonstrated the capacity of civil society to mobilize peacefully on a massive scale. Furthermore, the movement helped create political pressure that encouraged both local and national actors to seek alternative solutions to the conflict (Andri Rafi Prayogo, 2025; Nilsson & Svensson, 2023). From developments eventually contributed to the peace process that culminated in the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding and the enactment of Law No. 11 of 2006 concerning the Governance of Aceh (Rahman, 2023).

Therefore, the Aceh referendum discourse should be understood not merely as a failed political project but as an important stage in the evolution of Acehnese political aspirations. The movement reflected broader struggles over participation, recognition, justice, and self-determination within the framework of a unitary state. Its historical significance lies in its ability to transform collective grievances into organized political action and to influence subsequent pathways toward peace and political accommodation. The Aceh experience demonstrates that even when social movements fail to achieve their immediate objectives, they can still generate long-term political consequences that reshape relationships between society and the state.

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the emergence, development, mass mobilization, and eventual failure of the Aceh referendum discourse in 1999, as well as its broader implications for political transformation and conflict resolution in Aceh. The study specifically investigated how historical grievances, collective trauma, political exclusion, and civil society activism shaped the development of referendum aspirations within the post-New Order political transition in Indonesia.

The findings demonstrate that the 1999 Aceh referendum discourse emerged from a complex interaction of historical injustice, human rights violations during the DOM period, economic inequality, and long-standing political marginalization under a centralized state system. These conditions generated collective trauma and widespread distrust toward the central government, which encouraged demands for self-determination as an alternative mechanism for resolving the conflict.

The study further finds that student movements and civil society organizations played a decisive role in transforming the referendum from an intellectual discourse into a mass political movement. Testimonies from Fuad Mardhatillah, Nasrul Sufi, Thamren, Muhammad Taufik Abda, Nasruddin Abu Bakar, Munawar Liza Zainal, and Cut Asmaul Husna demonstrate that the referendum idea initially developed within student intellectual circles, before being institutionalized through organizational platforms such as KOMPAS and SIRA, and later expanded into large-scale public mobilization.

Despite its strong social legitimacy, the referendum movement ultimately failed to achieve its political objective. This failure was shaped by internal limitations, including weak strategic planning, fragmentation of leadership, and limited political preparedness. Externally, the central government rejected the referendum demand on the grounds of national unity and territorial integrity, particularly within the fragile post-Reformasi political context and the precedent of Timor-Leste's independence.

Although the referendum was never implemented, the movement produced significant historical and political consequences. It contributed to the strengthening of political consciousness among Acehnese society, reshaped national discourse on conflict resolution, and indirectly influenced the peace process that culminated in the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and Law No. 11 of 2006 on the Governance of Aceh. Therefore, the referendum movement should be understood as a transformative political process rather than merely a failed political demand.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the understanding of social movements in post-conflict societies by demonstrating that political mobilization is driven not only by ethnic identity, but also by structural inequality, collective memory, and political opportunity structures. It also highlights the critical role of student intellectual networks in shaping alternative political discourses during democratic transitions.

From a broader perspective, the significance of this study lies in showing that unsuccessful political movements can still produce long-term institutional and political change. The Aceh referendum movement illustrates how collective action, even when unsuccessful in achieving immediate goals, can reshape political narratives and contribute to new pathways of peacebuilding (Deddy Romanza, Alfian, 2022)

However, this study has several limitations. First, the findings are based on qualitative interviews with selected informants, which may not fully represent the diversity of perspectives within Acehnese society. Second, the study focuses primarily on the period surrounding 1999 and does not extensively examine the long-term evolution of referendum discourse after the Helsinki peace agreement. Third, limited access to state actors and high-level political decision-makers constrains the analysis of elite-level negotiations in greater depth.

Despite these limitations, the study provides important empirical and theoretical contributions by documenting how grassroots political mobilization can influence long-term political transformation even in cases of apparent failure. It emphasizes that political movements should not only be assessed by their immediate success, but also by their broader historical and institutional impact.

Future research is recommended in three main directions. First, longitudinal studies should examine the trajectories of referendum activists and civil society actors after the Helsinki peace process to understand how political identities evolve over time. Second, comparative research with other autonomy or referendum movements in Indonesia and Southeast Asia is needed to deepen theoretical understanding of self-determination movements in post-colonial states. Third, mixed-method approaches incorporating quantitative data could provide broader generalizability regarding public attitudes toward autonomy, self-determination, and state legitimacy in post-conflict societies.

In terms of policy implications, the findings suggest that inclusive political dialogue, early recognition of grievances, and participatory conflict resolution mechanisms are essential in preventing the escalation of separatist demands. Security-based approaches alone are insufficient without parallel political accommodation and institutional openness.

Ethics approval

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all informants prior to interviews, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process.

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Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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Underlying data

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of qualitative interview transcripts and supporting secondary literature. Due to ethical considerations and confidentiality agreements, raw interview data are not publicly available but may be requested from the author under reasonable academic conditions.

Declaration of artificial intelligence use

This manuscript utilized artificial intelligence tools as writing assistance for language refinement, structural editing, and improvement of readability. All analytical interpretations, arguments, and final academic decisions were independently made by the author to ensure research integrity.

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