

The Paradox of Success: Social Movement Advocacy, Political Opportunity, and Transitional Justice in Post-conflict Aceh, Indonesia

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This study investigates the paradox of success in post-conflict Aceh, Indonesia, where social movements achieved a legislative mandate for the creation of the Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission (KKRA) but subsequently faced institutional paralysis. Using a synthesized framework of political process theory and resource mobilization theory, and drawing on ten in-depth interviews and systematic document analysis, the study argues that the 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding created a transitional moment that enabled legal advocacy while simultaneously entrenching an elite collusion of interest hostile to its implementation. The findings reveal that, while civil society successfully mobilized moral and cultural resources to pass Qanun Aceh No. 17 of 2013, the movement was structurally constrained by resource scarcity and bureaucratic obstruction, rendering the KKRA an institutional orphan.

Keywords social movements, transitional justice, political opportunity, post-conflict Aceh, truth commission

Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of post-conflict peacebuilding, civil society is frequently eulogized as the critical catalyst for transitional justice, particularly in nations where state actors remain reticent to confront the atrocities of the past. The global proliferation of truth commissions—from the paradigmatic South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission to similar mechanisms in Latin America and Southeast Asia—has often been propelled by the tireless advocacy of victims' groups, human rights organizations, and scholar-activists who refuse to let the past remain buried (Brahm 2007; Hayner 2011). Theoretical literature, particularly within the “local turn” in peacebuilding, posits that civil society serves

as a vital moral compass, capable of pressuring fragile post-conflict states into compliance with international human rights norms (Gready and Robins 2017). Yet a critical empirical puzzle persists within this literature, one that challenges the linear narrative in which advocacy leads seamlessly to implementation: what occurs when a social movement achieves its primary institutional goal—in this case, the legal creation of a state-sanctioned truth commission—only to witness that institution systematically undermined, starved of resources, and politically isolated by the very political ecosystem that authorized its existence?

This study investigates this paradox of success through a granular analysis of the Coalition for Aceh Truth Recovery (*Koalisi Pengungkapan Kebenaran Aceh* [KPK Aceh]) and its protracted, decade-long advocacy for the Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*Komisi Kebenaran dan Rekonsiliasi Aceh* [KKRA]) in Indonesia. The province of Aceh, located on the northern tip of Sumatra, endured three decades of armed conflict (1976-2005) between the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka* [GAM]) and the Government of Indonesia. Characterized by gross human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and systematic torture—particularly during the Military Operations Zone (*Daerah Operasi Militer*) period (1989-1998)—the conflict left a deep scar on the social fabric of the region (Amnesty International 2013; Taqwadin 2024, 65). Following the devastation of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, a mutually hurting stalemate facilitated the signing of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 2005. This peace agreement explicitly mandated the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission for Aceh (Aspinall 2005).

While the peace agreement successfully ended hostilities, the trajectory of transitional justice in Aceh has been far from linear. The realization of the MoU's human rights mandates has been fraught with delays, obstruction, and bureaucratic inertia. Although the KKRA was legally established via a local bylaw (Qanun Aceh No. 17 of 2013) and finally inaugurated in 2016, it operates in a precarious limbo. It navigates a hostile political terrain where former combatants, who have since integrated into the state apparatus, and national elites share a tacit interest in impunity. This disconnection between the de jure existence of the commission and its de facto operational paralysis necessitates a move beyond merely cataloging the success or failure of advocacy. Instead, it requires a structural understanding of the interplay between social movement agency and the rigid constraints of a post-conflict conflicted democracy (Aoláin and Campbell 2005, 175).

Academic literature on Aceh has extensively covered the role of civil society in disaster relief and reconstruction (Eko, Yuniver, and Hiqmah 2009; Tjoetra 2017) and the dynamics of student movements during the Indonesian democratic transition (Fasya 2005). There remains, however, a distinct gap in analyzing the specific strategies of advocacy employed by social movements for transitional

justice within the unique political opportunity structure created by the Helsinki peace process. Furthermore, broader transitional justice scholarship often focuses on national-level mechanisms, frequently overlooking the specific dynamics of local or sub-national truth commissions operating within a unitary state that is hostile to local accountability (Magarrell and Gutierrez 2006; Kim 2012).

To address these gaps and explain the causal mechanisms behind this institutional paralysis, this research employs a synthesized theoretical framework combining political process theory (PPT) and resource mobilization theory (RMT). Unlike generic descriptive approaches, this synthesized framework enables a more rigorous analytical judgment of how resource constraints interact with shifting elite alignments over time. PPT provides the lens to examine the external environment—the political opportunity structure—by focusing on the openness of the political system, the stability of elite alignments, and the availability of influential allies (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tarrow 2011). In the context of Aceh, the 2005 Helsinki MoU created a vital opening—a transitional moment—that legitimized the discourse of human rights. However, as peace consolidated, the political structure shifted. The conflict between local elites (former and affiliated GAM members) and national elites (Jakarta) transformed into a form of predatory collusion, in which both sides prioritized political stability, amnesty, and economic reintegration over accountability (Taqwadin 2024, 218). This shift effectively closed the political space for genuine truth-seeking, rendering the KKRA an institutional orphan—legally alive but politically abandoned.

Complementing this structural analysis, RMT enables an examination of the internal agency of KPK Aceh. RMT posits that the success of a movement depends not just on grievances, which are constant in post-conflict settings, but on the ability to acquire and deploy resources (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Edwards and McCarthy 2004). This study categorizes these resources into five distinct types: moral resources (legitimacy and solidarity), cultural resources (strategic knowledge and framing), social-organizational resources (networks and infrastructure), human resources (expertise and leadership), and material resources (funding and assets).

This article argues that the paradoxical outcome in Aceh is a result of a fundamental resource mismatch within a shifting political opportunity structure. While KPK Aceh was exceptionally successful in mobilizing *moral* and *cultural* resources to win the normative battle for the Qanun Aceh in 2013, it lacked the *material* and *bureaucratic* resources necessary to enforce implementation against a recalcitrant state. The political settlement of 2005 was a double-edged sword: it created the legal mandate for truth-seeking but simultaneously empowered a new class of elites—former combatants—who viewed historical accountability as a threat to their newfound political and economic power. Consequently, the paradox of success experienced by KPK Aceh reflects not a failure of advocacy

per se but the structural limits of civil society agency when confronted with an elite pact designed to prioritize negative peace (the absence of violence) over positive peace (justice and social repair) (Galtung 1996).

This research relies on a qualitative single-case study design, drawing on ten in-depth interviews with key stakeholders—including movement leaders, KKRA commissioners, government officials, and former combatants—conducted between 2016 and 2021. This primary data is triangulated with analysis of legal texts, organizational archives, and media reports (Yin 2014). By focusing on the specific case of the KKRA, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of transitional justice in the Asia-Pacific region, challenging the teleological assumption that the legislative adoption of human rights mechanisms equates to their effective implementation. Furthermore, it elucidates the immense difficulty social movements face when pivoting from outsider strategies of protest during a conflict to insider strategies of bureaucratic lobbying during the implementation phase.

Ultimately, this article posits that reconciliation in Aceh cannot be viewed merely as a neutral outcome of truth-telling but must be understood as a highly politicized field of contestation (Bloomfield 2006). The KKRA stands at the intersection of competing visions: the elite version of reconciliation, characterized by silence and power-sharing, and the grassroots version championed by KPK Aceh, which demands truth, reparations, and the restoration of dignity. The following sections describe the methodology, analyze the successful mobilization of resources leading to the legislative victory of the KKRA, examine the subsequent paradox of implementation driven by elite collusion and resource scarcity, and conclude with the broader implications of Aceh's stalled transitional justice process for the field of peacebuilding.

Method

To investigate the complex dynamics between social movement agency and transitional justice mechanisms in post-conflict Aceh, this study employs a qualitative single-case study design (Yin 2014). This methodological approach is particularly pertinent given that the boundaries between the phenomenon under study—the advocacy strategies of KPK Aceh—and the volatile post-conflict political context are not clearly evident. By focusing on this single, instrumental case, the research facilitates a specific description of the advocacy process, enabling the identification of causal mechanisms regarding resource mobilization and political constraints that a broader comparative study might obscure. The research adopts a constructivist paradigm, acknowledging that the meaning of truth and justice is socially constructed through the interactions between civil society activists, state actors, and victims (Creswell 2014).

The specific period (2007-2021) was selected to capture the critical phases of the KKRA processes: from the establishment of KPK Aceh in 2007 to the intense political lobbying leading up to the inauguration of the KKRA in 2016, through its initial operational struggles, and to the completion of its first commissioners' term in 2021. Primary data were collected through two principal methods: semi-structured in-depth interviews and systematic document analysis. A total of ten in-depth interviews were conducted using a purposive sampling strategy to ensure a diversity of perspectives and to enable data triangulation across different stakeholder groups. The informants were categorized into four distinct groups to capture the complex interplay of interests: (1) core members of KPK Aceh, to understand internal resource mobilization strategies; (2) KKRA commissioners, for insider perspectives on bureaucratic hurdles; (3) senior members of GAM in Partai Aceh (the political party of the former GAM), to analyze the shifting elite settlement; and (4) members of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), who provided the intellectual infrastructure for the movement.

Complementing the interview data, primary and secondary documents were also analyzed. This included a review of legal texts such as the 2005 Helsinki MoU, Law No. 11/2006 on the Governing of Aceh (*Undang-Undang tentang Pemerintahan Aceh* [UUPA]), and Qanun Aceh No. 17 of 2013. Data analysis followed the interactive model involving data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña 2014). Interview transcripts and documents were processed using NVivo qualitative data analysis software to facilitate systematic thematic coding. The coding process was iterative, combining inductive codes that emerged directly from the data with deductive codes derived from the synthesized framework of PPT and RMT (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Tarrow 2011). This analytical process allowed the study to move beyond mere description and construct a coherent explanatory narrative regarding the paradox of success in Aceh's transitional justice process.

Mobilizing for Justice: The Genesis, Legislative Victory, and Institutional Stagnation of the KKRA

The trajectory of transitional justice advocacy in post-conflict Aceh defies the linear progression often assumed in peacebuilding literature, moving instead through a volatile oscillation between legislative success and institutional paralysis. The empirical evidence gathered from 2007 to 2021 reveals that the establishment of the KKRA was not a benevolent gift from the state, but the hard-won product of a sophisticated social movement—KPK Aceh—that successfully navigated a specific, fleeting political opening. This same trajectory, however, exposes a disturbing reality in which the normative victory of creating the institution was immediately undercut by a shift in elite alignments, leaving the

KKRA as an entity that was legally mandated but materially starved.

The genesis of this movement cannot be separated from the transitional moment created by the 2005 Helsinki MoU. This agreement, which ended three decades of hostilities between the GAM and the Government of Indonesia, provided a vital opening for civil society (Aspinall 2005). While the peace negotiations were dominated by combatants, the text of the agreement explicitly mandated the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Article 2.3). In the immediate aftermath of the peace deal, however, these human rights provisions were largely sidelined as both the Indonesian government and the former GAM leadership focused on political reintegration and economic reconstruction. It was in this vacuum of implementation that KPK Aceh was formed in 2007 (Coalition for Aceh Truth Recovery 2007). The coalition functioned as a “network of networks,” aggregating the diverse capabilities of organizations such as LBH Banda Aceh (legal aid), KontraS Aceh (forced disappearances), RPUK (women’s rights), Koalisi NGO HAM (human rights advocacy), various other NGOs, victim communities, and professionals (author’s interviews with Zulfikar Muhammad, Coordinator of KPK Aceh, Banda Aceh, May 21, 2022; and Hendra Sahputra, former Director of KontraS Aceh, Banda Aceh, January 21, 2022). This consolidation of civil society was a strategic necessity; individual organizations lacked the leverage to challenge the state, but as a unified coalition, they could pool data, share logistical burdens, and present a unified front to the Aceh Parliament (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Aceh* [DPRA]) (author’s interview with Hendra Sahputra, former Director of KontraS Aceh, Banda Aceh, January 21, 2022).

The coalition’s initial efficacy during the legislative drafting phase (2007–2013) was driven by a sophisticated strategy of “vernacularization” (Merry 2006; Taqwadin 2024). The findings indicate that the movement’s scholar-activists—academics from local universities who provided the intellectual infrastructure for the coalition—deliberately translated universal human rights concepts into local Islamic and customary terminologies to bypass conservative resistance (author’s interview with Zulfikar Muhammad, Coordinator of KPK Aceh, Banda Aceh, May 21, 2022).

During the public consultations and drafting sessions with the DPRA, which was dominated by the Partai Aceh (the political party of the former GAM), the coalition faced significant skepticism. Many former combatants viewed the concept of a truth commission as either a Western imposition or a trap designed to prosecute them for wartime acts (author’s interview with Nurzahri, former member of Aceh’s Parliament from Partai Aceh, Banda Aceh, January 21, 2022). To counter this, KPK Aceh reframed the narrative. Instead of using the potentially threatening language of “human rights trials,” they strategically used concepts such as *islah* (reconciliation) and *diyat* (compensation/blood money) to frame the academic draft of the *Qanun Aceh* (local bylaw) (author’s interview with Zulfikar

Muhammad, Coordinator of KPK Aceh, Banda Aceh, May 21, 2022).

As one senior activist involved in the drafting recalled during an interview, the strategy was to wrap the “bitter pill of accountability” in the “sweet casing” of religious obligation. By arguing that the truth commission was a mechanism to restore the *marwah* (dignity) of the victims and the nationalism of Aceh, the coalition made it politically costly for the GAM-dominated parliament to reject the bill without appearing to contradict the very Acehnese identity they claimed to defend. This cultural framing provided a religious shield for the legislation, successfully neutralizing opposition from hardline elements. Consequently, on December 27, 2013, the DPR Aceh enacted Qanun Aceh No. 17 of 2013, making Aceh the first province in Indonesia to legally establish a local truth commission, defying the national trend of impunity (author’s interview with Afridal Darmi, former Chairman of KKRA’s Commissioner 2016-2021 and former Director of LBH Banda Aceh, Banda Aceh, February 8, 2022).

The enactment of the Qanun Aceh, however, marked the beginning of a profound stagnation. While the movement successfully mobilized normative power to create the law, it immediately encountered the hard power of the state during the implementation phase. The post-2013 period (after the enactment of Qanun Aceh No. 17 of 2013) witnessed a fundamental shift in the political landscape. The conflict of interests that had previously divided Jakarta and GAM—and which civil society had exploited—evolved into a collusion of interests. Both the national government and the former combatants (now entrenched in the local executive) prioritized political stability and the flow of Special Autonomy Funds (*Dana Otonomi Khusus*) over historical accountability. This was evident in the immediate aftermath of the Qanun’s passing. The Ministry of Home Affairs in Jakarta raised objections to the Qanun Aceh, viewing it as a challenge to national sovereignty and a potential trigger for opening old wounds involving the military and security apparatus (*Tentara Nasional Indonesia* and *Kepolisian Republik Indonesia*). Simultaneously, the local executive government in Aceh, despite being led by former combatants who had signed the Helsinki MoU, showed little political will to operationalize the commission (author’s interview with Afridal Darmi, former Chairman of KKRA’s Commissioner 2016-2021 and former Director of LBH Banda Aceh, Banda Aceh, February 8, 2022).

This dual resistance resulted in a three-year limbo (2013-2016) in which the selection of commissioners was repeatedly delayed. It was only through sustained pressure from KPK Aceh—including lobbying, media campaigns, and mobilizing victim groups to attend parliamentary sessions—that the selection process moved forward (author’s interview with Hendra Sahputra, former Director of KontraS Aceh, Banda Aceh, January 21, 2022). Finally, in 2016, the first seven commissioners of the KKRA were inaugurated. Yet, this inauguration did not signal the start of effective functioning; rather, it marked the beginning of a negotiated functioning defined by severe resource scarcity (Taqwadin 2024).

Unlike independent state bodies that possess their own budget lines, the KKRA was structurally tethered to the executive branch. It was not established as a standalone working unit (Aceh Provincial Government Working Unit [*Satuan Kerja Perangkat Aceh*]) but was instead administratively attached to the Aceh Reintegration Agency (*Badan Reintegrasi Aceh* [BRA]) (author's interview with Raihal Fajri, Director of the Katahati Institute, Banda Aceh, May 23, 2022; and Afridal Darmi, former Chairman of KKRA's Commissioner 2021-2026 and former Director of LBH Banda Aceh, Banda Aceh, February 8, 2022).

This structural dependency had debilitating consequences for the commission's daily operations. Interviews with commissioners revealed that they lacked autonomy over their own budget. Every operational expense, from office rent to travel costs for victim verification, had to be approved by the BRA and the Governor's office. One commissioner described the humiliation of this dependency, noting that they were "treated like a temporary project" rather than a state institution mandated by a peace accord. The secretariat of the KKRA was staffed not by independent professionals hired by the commissioners, but by civil servants appointed by the government. These bureaucrats often held dual loyalties, and in many instances, prioritized the administrative directives of the executive government over the programmatic needs of the truth commission. This bureaucratic friction slowed down the intake of statements and created an internal culture of inertia (author's interview with Evi N. Zain, former KKRA's Commissioner 2016-2021 and former lawyer of LBH Banda Aceh, Banda Aceh, June 5, 2022).

The financial strangulation was acute. In the early years of its operation, the KKRA frequently ran out of funds midway through the fiscal year, forcing commissioners to halt field activities or, in some cases, use their personal funds to cover logistical costs. This "resource starvation" served as a form of passive obstruction; the state did not need to ban the commission, it simply needed to underfund it to render it ineffective (author's interview with Fajran Zain, former KKRA's Commissioner 2016-2021 and former Director of The Aceh Institute, Banda Aceh, January 19, 2022). The national government further compounded this isolation by refusing to formally acknowledge the KKRA's mandate, leaving the commission in a precarious legal gray zone where its recommendations for reparations could be ignored by national agencies (author's interview with Afridal Darmi, former Chairman of KKRA's Commissioner 2016-2021 and former Director of LBH Banda Aceh, Banda Aceh, February 8, 2022).

Despite these overwhelming structural constraints, the findings also highlight the resilience of the social movement. When bureaucratic channels were blocked, KPK Aceh and the KKRA pivoted back to the public sphere, leveraging "performative resources" to reclaim the narrative (author's interview with Fajran Zain, former KKRA's Commissioner 2016-2021 and former Director of The Aceh Institute, Banda Aceh, January 19, 2022). A landmark achievement

occurred in November 2018 with the organization of the first public hearing (*rapat dengar kesaksian* [RDK]). This event, held in Banda Aceh, was a watershed moment. For the first time in the history of the Aceh conflict, victims of torture and sexual violence testified publicly about their experiences in front of state officials, commissioners, and the media. The hearing was not fully funded by the state; it was facilitated by the logistical and organizational support of the KPK Aceh network, which mobilized victims from remote districts and provided psychosocial accompaniment (author's interview with Afridal Darmi, former Chairman KKRA's Commissioner 2016-2021 and former Director of LBH Banda Aceh, Banda Aceh, February 8, 2022; and Hendra Sahputra, former Director of KontraS Aceh, Banda Aceh, January 21, 2022).

The RDK served as a powerful rupture in the silence that had shrouded the conflict's history. It forced the public and the state to confront the visceral reality of the past, challenging the sanitized narrative of peace that focused solely on infrastructure and economic development. As one victim who testified stated, the hearing was a form of catharsis and recognition, a proof that their suffering was not merely a private tragedy but a matter of public record (author's interview with Leila Juari, former Director of RPUK, Banda Aceh, June 7, 2022). The success of the RDK demonstrated that, while the movement lacked the material resources to run a fully functional state institution, it retained the moral resources to mobilize victims and compel public attention (Taqwadin 2024).

This assertion of agency, however, was not without cost. The research identifies incidents of low-level repression and intimidation that surfaced when the commission's work touched on sensitive nerves. In 2018, volunteer statement-takers from Pengembangan Aktifitas Sosial Ekonomi Masyarakat (PASKA) Aceh, an NGO and member of KPK Aceh, received verbal threats while documenting cases in Pidie Jaya. Unknown individuals warned them to stop "digging up the past" (author's interview with Raihal Fajri, Director of the Katahati Institute, Banda Aceh, May 23, 2022). While such overt threats were sporadic, they, combined with the constant bureaucratic obstruction, signaled the precariousness of the truth-seeking enterprise. The movement also faced internal challenges. The decline of international donor funding after the end of the post-tsunami reconstruction phase left many local NGOs struggling for survival. This created unequal access to resources within the coalition and occasional friction regarding the best strategy to support the KKRA—whether to maintain an adversarial stance toward the government or to pursue a more cooperative, albeit compromised, approach (author's interview with Nurzahri, former member of Aceh's Parliament from Partai Aceh, Banda Aceh, January 21, 2022; Faisal Hadi, Consultant at KontraS Aceh, Banda Aceh, June 8, 2022; and Fajran Zain, former KKRA's Commissioner 2016-2021 and former Director of The Aceh Institute, Banda Aceh, January 19, 2022).

By the end of the first term of commissioners in 2021, the KKRA had managed

to collect over five thousand statements from victims, a significant achievement given its resource constraints (author's interview with Fajran Zain, former KKRA's Commissioner 2016-2021 and former Director of The Aceh Institute, Banda Aceh, January 19, 2022). Yet, the core mandate of the commission—reparations and reconciliation—remained largely unfulfilled. The recommendations for comprehensive reparations submitted to the government were met with silence or bureaucratic deflection. The institutional orphan status of the KKRA remained unchanged: it was legally alive, mandated by the peace accord and by local law, but politically abandoned by the executive powers responsible for its existence.

The findings thus paint a picture of a “simulated compliance” by the state, which allows the institution to exist to satisfy legal obligations while starving it of the capacity to effect genuine transitional justice. The survival of the KKRA in this hostile environment is attributable not to state support, but to the relentless, adaptive pressure of the civil society coalition that birthed it, proving that in the context of Aceh, the struggle for truth is a continuous war of attrition between the normative demands of victims and the material interests of the post-conflict elite.

The Paradox of Implementation: Elite Collusion, Resource Mismatch, and the Limits of Civil Society Agency

The empirical trajectory of the KKRA—characterized by a triumphant legislative birth followed by a protracted institutional stagnation—presents a profound theoretical puzzle for the study of transitional justice in post-conflict societies. To explain this paradox of success, whereby a social movement achieves its primary normative goal only to witness the resulting institution paralyzed by the very political ecosystem that authorized its existence, it is necessary to move beyond a linear narrative of advocacy. Instead, this analysis employs a synthesized framework of PPT and RMT to interrogate the structural dynamics at play. The central argument posits that the initial success of the Coalition for Aceh Truth Recovery (KPK Aceh) was contingent upon a specific, fleeting alignment of the “political opportunity structure” (Tarrow 2011, 27) during the early transition, which allowed the movement to leverage its specific endowment of moral and cultural resources. However, the subsequent stagnation of the KKRA was driven by a fundamental shift in elite alignments—from conflict to collusion—which rendered these intangible resources insufficient against the material and bureaucratic obstructionism of the consolidated post-conflict state. This divergence between the normative power of civil society and the material power of the state elite elucidates the structural limits of the local turn in peacebuilding when grounded in an unstable political settlement.

The genesis of the KKRA must be understood as a product of a specific

“transitional moment” (Aoláin and Campbell 2005, 195) created by the 2005 Helsinki MoU (Taqwadin 2024, 327). PPT suggests that social movements are most effective when political alignments are unstable and elites are divided (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). The period immediately following the peace agreement represented precisely such a rupture. The Helsinki MoU ended three decades of vertical conflict between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), but it did not immediately consolidate a new hegemonic order. Instead, it created a fluid environment defined by “competitive clientelism” (Aspinall 2005), where neither the national government nor the former combatants held absolute control over the political narrative. The presence of the Aceh Monitoring Mission and the influx of international post-tsunami reconstruction actors (following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami) further served to de-securitize the political space, temporarily suspending the state’s traditional repertoire of repression. In this window of opportunity, the fragmentation between the national elite (concerned with territorial integrity) and the local elite (concerned with political survival) created a strategic wedge. KPK Aceh, acting as a sophisticated “conflict entrepreneur” for justice, inserted the agenda of truth-seeking into this cleavage, framing it not as a threat to the peace, but as a mechanism to stabilize it, thereby aligning their movement with the broader peacebuilding discourse favored by international donors and the state (Taqwadin 2024, 413).

The *openness* of the political system, however, was merely a facilitating condition; the decisive factor was the movement’s agency in mobilizing resources. RMT posits that the efficacy of a movement depends on its ability to acquire and deploy resources to achieve its goals (McCarthy and Zald 1977). A critical finding of this study is the asymmetric nature of the resources available to KPK Aceh. Lacking the material resources (financial capital) and coercive resources (military power) possessed by the state and the former insurgents, the coalition relied heavily on cultural and moral resources. The strategy of vernacularization (Merry 2006; Taqwadin 2024) employed by the movement’s scholar-activists serves as a prime example of successful resource mobilization in a resource-poor environment. By translating universal human rights concepts into local Islamic and customary terminologies—framing the truth commission not through the lens of liberal legalism but through the concepts of *islah* (reconciliation) and *diyat* (compensation)—the movement effectively indigenized the demand for justice.

This cultural framing functioned as a potent political resource. In the context of Aceh’s increasing conservatism and the implementation of Sharia law, the language of Islam possessed a higher currency of legitimacy than the language of international law. By anchoring the draft Qanun Aceh in Islamic jurisprudence, the movement created a religious shield that made it politically costly for the GAM-dominated parliament (the DPRA) to reject the bill. To oppose the truth commission, framed as a mechanism for *islah*, would have been to oppose a

religious imperative, a risk the emerging local political elite was unwilling to take. This demonstrates that in “conflicted democracies” (Aoláin and Campbell 2005, 189), where formal institutions are weak, the ability of social movements to mobilize cultural symbols and moral authority can temporarily bypass the structural dominance of political elites. The enactment of Qanun Aceh No. 17 of 2013 on the establishment of KKRA was, therefore, a victory of soft power over the latent hard power of the security apparatus.

Yet, the very nature of this victory sowed the seeds of the subsequent paradox. The transition from the legislative phase to the implementation phase marked a fundamental shift in the arena of contention—from the open, discursive sphere of parliament to the closed, material sphere of bureaucracy. It is in this transition that the limitations of the movement’s resource base became glaringly apparent. PPT warns that political opportunities are dynamic; windows that open can also close (Tarrow 2011). The post-2013 period (following the enactment of Qanun Aceh No. 17 of 2013) in Aceh witnessed a closure of the political opportunity structure driven by a realignment of elite interests. The *conflict* of interests that had previously characterized the relationship between Jakarta and GAM evolved into what this study conceptually defines as a *collusion* of interests.

This theoretical concept of elite collusion is central to understanding the paralysis of the KKRA. As the peace process consolidated, the former combatants successfully transformed themselves into a ruling political class, dominating the executive and legislative branches of the provincial government. Simultaneously, the national government in Jakarta became invested in the stability of this new order to secure the continued extraction of natural resources and to showcase Aceh as a model of peace to the international community. This convergence created a powerful incentive structure where both national and local elites benefited from the status quo. For the national elite, operationalizing a truth commission risked reopening historical wounds, exposing military atrocities, and potentially triggering command responsibility trials that could reach the highest levels of the Indonesian military and security apparatus. For the local elite—the former GAM commanders—a robust KKRA posed a dual threat: it could expose their own wartime violations (internal purges and abuses), and more significantly, it could destabilize the fragile patronage networks funded by the Special Autonomy Funds.

Consequently, the elite fragmentation that civil society had exploited in the early years was replaced by an elite pact of silence. This pact was not necessarily explicit or written, but it was structurally enforced through the mechanisms of bureaucracy. The obstruction of the KKRA was not achieved through the violent repression characteristic of the conflict era—which would have drawn international condemnation—but through bureaucratic strangulation or passive repression. This form of repression is subtle, technical, and highly effective. By withholding the Governor’s Regulation (*Peraturan Gubernur*) necessary for

budget disbursement, delaying the inauguration of commissioners, and refusing to integrate the KKRA into the formal state administrative structure, the executive branch effectively neutralized the institution without formally abolishing it. This aligns with the observations of Sriram (2004) regarding the tendency of transitional regimes to prioritize “negative peace” (the absence of violence) over “positive justice,” using administrative inertia as a tool of containment.

Here, RMT provides the analytical lens to explain why the movement struggled to counter this bureaucratic strangulation. The battle for implementation requires a different set of resources than the battle for legislation. While moral resources (legitimacy) and cultural resources (framing) are effective in shaping public opinion and pressuring legislators, they hold little sway over the technical machinery of budget allocation and administrative regulation. Implementation runs on material resources (money, infrastructure) and bureaucratic authority, both of which are monopolies of the state executive. The movement’s reliance on performative activism—demonstrations, lobbying, and media campaigns—proved ineffective against the invisible walls of bureaucratic delay. One cannot shame a bureaucracy into action in the same way one can shame a politician; the diffusion of responsibility within the administrative apparatus dilutes the impact of moral pressure.

Furthermore, the social-organizational resources of the coalition itself began to erode. The decline in international donor funding following the completion of the post-tsunami reconstruction phase removed a critical lifeline for many local NGOs (Taqwadin 2024). During the conflict, the presence of international donors provided an alternative resource base that allowed civil society to operate independently of the state (Barter 2004). As these donors withdrew, local organizations were forced to compete for shrinking pools of funding, often leading to co-optation or internal fragmentation. The “Boomerang Effect” (Keck and Sikkink 1998, 29)—the ability of local movements to leverage international allies to pressure their own government—also lost its potency. As the narrative of Aceh shifted from a humanitarian emergency to a successful peace process, international attention waned. The costs of non-compliance for the Indonesian government dropped significantly; they could afford to ignore the KKRA because the international community was no longer watching closely. This deprived KPK Aceh of its most powerful external lever, leaving it to fight an asymmetric war of attrition against a resource-rich state apparatus.

However, the institutionalization of the truth-seeking process, often hailed as the ultimate goal of advocacy, paradoxically contributed to the movement’s disempowerment. By embedding the KKRA within the state structure to secure its legal legitimacy, the movement inadvertently surrendered control over its operational viability (author’s interview with Norma Manalu, former Director of Balai Syura ureung Inong Aceh, Banda Aceh, June 9, 2022). The KKRA became an institutional orphan—a hybrid entity that was legally part of the state but

politically disowned by it. Structurally tethered to the executive for its budget and staffing, the commission lacked the autonomy to challenge its “parent.” The secretariat, staffed by civil servants loyal to the executive, acted as a gatekeeper, filtering the commission’s actions and slowing its momentum. This confirms the critique by Gready and Robins (2017) regarding the dangers of state-centric transitional justice: when civil society relies on the state to deliver justice in a context where the state itself is a perpetrator (or colludes with perpetrators), the resulting institutions are often designed to fail or to perform a “simulated compliance.”

This simulation of compliance is a key finding. The state allowed the KKRA to exist, to hold meetings, and to collect statements, thereby satisfying the legal requirements of the Qanun Aceh and the Helsinki MoU. However, by starving it of the resources needed to process those statements into legal findings or reparations, the state ensured that the “truth” remained contained within the commission’s archives, never translating into public policy or judicial action. The institution became a containment vessel for grievances rather than a mechanism for redress. This mirrors the phenomenon observed by Brahm (2007) in post-apartheid violence in South Africa, where truth commissions are used as pressure valves to release social tension without altering the structural conditions of impunity.

The analysis, however, would be incomplete if it concluded with total failure. The resilience of the movement, demonstrated through the adaptive agency of the 2018 RDK (public hearing), reveals the enduring power of social-organizational resources. When the state blocked the bureaucratic channels, the movement pivoted back to the “repertoires of contention” (Tilly 1978, 143-71) it had honed during the conflict. By organizing a public hearing using its own networks and resources—bypassing the state’s financial blockade—KPK Aceh reclaimed the public sphere. This event was a performative rupture that challenged the elite pact of silence. It demonstrated that while the movement could not force the state to act, it could still force the state to listen. The hearing served to validate the victims’ experiences and maintain the visibility of the past, preventing the total erasure of history that the elite collusion sought to achieve.

This pivot highlights a crucial theoretical nuance: in post-conflict settings defined by elite collusion, civil society’s power lies not in its ability to govern or implement, but in its ability to disrupt and testify. The paradox of success in Aceh suggests that legislative victories are not endpoints but merely shift the terrain of struggle. The law provides a foothold—a legitimizing structure—that prevents the complete closure of political opportunity, but it does not guarantee outcomes. The KKRA survives not because the system works, but because the movement refuses to let it die. This persistence is a form of counter-hegemonic resistance (in the broader sense of cultural hegemony [Gramsci 1971]), that keeps the alternative vision of peace—one based on justice rather than amnesty—alive in the collective

consciousness.

In conclusion, the case of the KKRA elucidates the complex interplay between structure and agency in transitional justice. The synthesized framework of PPT and RMT reveals that while agency (resource mobilization) can open windows of opportunity and secure normative victories, structure (political opportunity and elite alignments) ultimately dictates the material limits of implementation. The collusion of interests between former combatants and the national state created a structural ceiling for the KKRA that no amount of moral framing could breach. This suggests that the local turn in peacebuilding must be re-evaluated to account for the political economy of post-conflict settlements. Local ownership is insufficient if the local owners have a vested interest in impunity.

Ultimately, the Aceh experience challenges the teleological assumption that peace agreements inevitably lead to justice. Instead, it presents a reality where justice is a negotiated product of continuous contestation. The stagnation of the KKRA is not an accident of bureaucracy but a feature of the political settlement. Yet, the continued existence of the commission, sustained by the relentless pressure of civil society, represents a significant, albeit fragile, achievement. It stands as a testament to the fact that while elites can control the budget, they cannot fully monopolize the truth. The paradox of success is thus a double-edged sword: it represents the frustration of unfulfilled mandates, but also the enduring capacity of civil society to maintain a foothold for justice in hostile political terrains. The struggle for the KKRA is not over; it has simply moved into a phase of “guerrilla bureaucracy,” where the movement fights for every inch of operational space to keep the promise of the Helsinki MoU alive for the victims who have already waited too long.

Conclusion

The experience of the Coalition for Aceh Truth Recovery (KPK Aceh) and the subsequent trajectory of the Aceh Truth and Reconciliation Commission (KKRA) offer a profound lesson on the limits and possibilities of civil society agency in post-conflict peacebuilding. This study elucidates that the paradox of success in Aceh—where a landmark legislative victory is followed by institutional paralysis—is not merely a failure of administrative capacity, but a structural outcome of a shifting political settlement. The establishment of the KKRA through Qanun Aceh No. 17 of 2013 stands as a testament to the sophisticated resource mobilization of Acehnese civil society. By leveraging specific windows of political opportunity during the early transition and vernacularizing human rights norms into local Islamic frameworks, the movement successfully navigated complex elite dynamics to institutionalize the demand for truth (Taqwadin 2024).

This success, however, was fundamentally contingent. The institutionalization

of the truth-seeking process ultimately exposed it to the structural inertia and passive resistance of the post-conflict state. By anchoring the truth commission within the state apparatus to secure its legitimacy, the movement inadvertently rendered the mechanism vulnerable to the very elites it was designed to scrutinize. This study reveals that the peace established by the 2005 Helsinki MoU, while successful in terminating armed hostilities, was predicated on an elite pact that marginalized accountability in favor of stability and economic reintegration (Aspinall 2005). As the conflict of interests between former combatants and the national government evolved into a collusion of interests, the political opportunity structure that once allowed for the passage of the law closed firmly against its implementation (Taqwadin 2024). Consequently, the KKRA remains an institutional orphan—legally mandated by the peace accord, yet politically abandoned and financially starved by the executive powers responsible for its existence.

Theoretically, these findings underscore the critical need to move beyond the mere adoption of mechanisms as the primary metric of success in transitional justice scholarship. The Aceh case suggests that legislative victory is not the end of the struggle but simply a shift in the arena of contention: from the open, normative battles of the public sphere to the closed, material battles of bureaucracy where social movements often lack the necessary leverage (Tarrow 2011). The disparity between the movement's abundance of moral and cultural resources and its deficit of material and bureaucratic resources explains why they could write the law but could not enforce it against a recalcitrant state.

For practitioners and advocates, the complex interplay in Aceh serves as a cautionary tale regarding the local turn in peacebuilding. While local ownership is crucial, without an analysis of the local political economy and the durability of elite pacts, locally-led justice mechanisms risk becoming hollow shells—monuments to a justice that is legally enshrined but politically deferred (Gready and Robins 2017, 963). The resilience of KPK Aceh lies not in its ability to overcome these structural barriers entirely, but in its persistence to keep the truth visible in the public sphere through performative acts of resistance. Ultimately, the pursuit of reconciliation in Aceh is revealed not as a technical exercise in institutional design, but as a continuous, deeply political struggle to reclaim the past from those who would prefer it remain buried. The KKRA survives not because of the state, but in spite of it, sustained only by the relentless, adaptive breath of civil society.

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