

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



# Comparison of the Helsinki MoU 2005 and the Final Peace Agreement 1996: A Case Study of Aceh, Indonesia and Mindanao, Philippines

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## Abstract

Separatist conflicts in Southeast Asia, particularly in Aceh and Mindanao, have posed enduring challenges to national integration and regional peace. This study examines and compares the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (2005) and the Final Peace Agreement (1996) as frameworks for resolving these long-standing insurgencies in Indonesia and the Philippines. While both agreements aimed to establish autonomy and end armed conflict, their implementation and outcomes diverged significantly. Employing a qualitative comparative case study approach, the research analyzes legal texts, policy documents, and scholarly literature across five key dimensions: legal legitimacy, political participation, fiscal autonomy, security arrangements, and socio-economic impact. The findings indicate that the Helsinki MoU achieved more durable peace through comprehensive legal integration, inclusive governance, and stable fiscal mechanisms. In contrast, the FPA was hampered by weak institutional support, exclusion of critical stakeholders, and financial dependency, leading to continued unrest and eventual renegotiation. These results highlight the necessity of legally grounded, inclusive, and well-resourced agreements in achieving sustainable conflict resolution.

## 1. Introduction

The conflict in Aceh dates back to the early years of Indonesia's independence. Located on the northern tip of Sumatra, Aceh historically enjoyed a degree of autonomy due to its strong Islamic identity and resistance against Dutch colonial rule. However, after Indonesia's independence in 1945, Aceh's demand for self-rule was disregarded when it was integrated into North Sumatra province. In response, a rebellion led by the Darul Islam movement broke out in the 1950s, culminating in Aceh being granted special status in 1959 [1].

Despite this, dissatisfaction among the Acehnese grew over time, primarily due to economic and political grievances. The central government in Jakarta heavily exploited Aceh's natural resources particularly oil and gas while failing to provide proportional economic benefits to the local population. Furthermore, Acehnese leaders and activists faced political repression under the Suharto regime (1967–1998), further fuelling resentment against Jakarta.

In 1976, the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka–GAM) was founded by Hasan di Tiro, demanding full independence for Aceh [2,3]. The conflict escalated into a prolonged insurgency, marked by human rights violations, military crackdowns, and violent clashes between GAM and Indonesian security forces. The situation deteriorated in the late 1990s, with the declaration of martial law in Aceh in 2003, leading to widespread violence.

Following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which devastated Aceh and killed over 170,000 people, both sides recognized the urgency of ending the conflict. The disaster served as a

catalyst for peace talks, culminating in the Helsinki MoU on August 15, 2005, mediated by the Crisis Management Initiative (CMI). The agreement granted Aceh special autonomy, allowing for local political participation, revenue control, and the implementation of Sharia law while ensuring Aceh remained within the Republic of Indonesia.

The conflict in Mindanao, Philippines, is rooted in centuries of historical grievances involving the marginalization of Muslim communities (Moros) by the predominantly Christian central government. During the Spanish and American colonial periods, the Moros fiercely resisted foreign rule. However, after the Philippines gained independence in 1946, successive administrations pursued aggressive policies of land redistribution, encouraging Christian settlers to migrate to Mindanao. This led to the displacement of Muslim communities, exacerbating ethnic and religious tensions.

By the late 1960s, frustration over land dispossession, political exclusion, and military repression led to the emergence of Moro nationalist movements. In 1972, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), led by Nur Misuari, launched an armed insurgency against the Philippine government, seeking an independent Bangsamoro state. In response, the government imposed martial law, leading to violent clashes between the military and MNLF forces.

Efforts to negotiate peace began in the 1970s, resulting in the Tripoli Agreement of 1976, which proposed autonomy for certain Muslim-majority provinces. However, disagreements over implementation led to continued fighting. The conflict intensified as new factions emerged, most notably the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which broke away from the MNLF in 1981, seeking a more radical approach to independence [4,5].

By the 1990s, diplomatic efforts resumed under President Fidel Ramos, culminating in the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) in Jakarta on September 2, 1996 [6]. The agreement aimed to integrate the MNLF into the national political framework by establishing the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) [7]. However, the deal was met with resistance from MILF and other armed groups, resulting in continued instability.

The separatist conflicts in Aceh and Mindanao lasted for decades before being resolved through peace agreements. The Helsinki MoU was signed on August 15, 2005, as a result of negotiations between the Government of Indonesia and GAM, while the FPA was signed in Jakarta on September 2, 1996, between the Government of the Philippines and the MNLF. Both agreements sought to end armed conflicts by granting special autonomy to the conflicted regions. This article discusses the implementation comparisons of both agreements and their success in building sustainable peace [8].

## 2. Methods

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This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine the effectiveness of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (2005) and the Final Peace Agreement (1996) in resolving separatist conflicts in Aceh, Indonesia, and Mindanao, Philippines. Grounded in conflict resolution and decentralization theories, the research aims to assess how autonomy-based peace agreements contribute to conflict resolution, [9–11]. Data were collected from a range of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included the full texts of the agreements, relevant legal instruments (e.g., Law No. 11/2006 and Republic Act No. 9054), and official government documents. Secondary sources comprised academic literature, international monitoring reports, and institutional evaluations related to the implementation and outcomes of the agreements [12].

The data analysis was conducted in three stages [13]. First, documents were organized by relevance to five key dimensions: legal legitimacy, political participation, fiscal autonomy, security and disarmament, and socio-economic impact. Second, thematic coding was applied to extract and categorize information across these dimensions. Third, a structured comparative

analysis was performed to identify patterns, divergences, and causal relationships between agreement design and post-conflict outcomes [14]. This approach enabled a systematic evaluation of how institutional frameworks, implementation strategies, and stakeholder inclusion influenced the relative success of each peace process [15].

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Basic Understanding of the Conflict and Its Resolution

The separatist conflicts in Aceh and Mindanao share common roots in resistance against centralized authority, driven by perceived injustices and demands for self-determination [16]. In Aceh, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) launched an armed struggle against the Indonesian government, citing severe grievances such as unequal resource distribution, particularly the exploitation of Aceh's rich oil and gas reserves, political repression, and systemic human rights abuses under the Suharto regime. Similarly, in Mindanao, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) emerged in response to the historical marginalization of Muslim Filipinos (Moros), who faced land dispossession, economic exclusion, and sociopolitical neglect from the predominantly Christian central government in Manila [17]. Both groups initially sought full independence but later shifted toward negotiated settlements. The Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (2005) granted Aceh extensive autonomy, including control over local governance, Sharia law implementation, and fiscal management. Meanwhile, the 1996 Final Peace Agreement created the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), though its implementation was hindered by limited authority, poor integration of armed factions, and insufficient fiscal support. These underlying disparities reflect why Aceh experienced a more sustainable peace, while Mindanao's conflict persisted beyond the FPA, eventually necessitating the creation of the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) nearly two decades later.

#### 3.2 Political Challenges in Implementation

The post-agreement political process became the main challenge in successfully implementing the Helsinki MoU and FPA. In Aceh, the Helsinki MoU gained stronger legitimacy through Law No. 11 of 2006, recognizing Aceh's autonomy and its right to establish local political parties. This allowed former GAM members to actively participate in local politics and governance [18].

In contrast, in the Philippines, the FPA faced significant political obstacles. Although ARMM was established, its weakness lay in the lack of full support from all Moro separatist groups [19].

#### 3.3 Impact on Social and Economic Stability

The impact of the peace agreements on social and economic stability also differs between Aceh and Mindanao [20]. In Aceh, the availability of Special Autonomy Funds provided opportunities for the local government to develop infrastructure and improve community welfare.

**Table 1.** Comparison of the Helsinki MoU and FPA.

Aspect	Helsinki MoU (2005)	Final Peace Agreement (1996)
Objective	Ending GAM's conflict and granting special autonomy to Aceh	Integrating MNLF into the Philippine government by establishing ARMM
Legal Basis	Law No. 11 of 2006 concerning Aceh Governance	RA 9054 as an amendment to ARMM
Autonomy Implementation	Aceh has authority over Sharia law, fiscal management, and politics	ARMM has limited autonomy with control remaining largely in the hands of the central government

Political Stability	Relatively stable with former GAM members participating in local politics	MNLF fragmented, leading to the emergence of MILF and new factions complicating implementation
Economic and Financial Aspects	Aceh receives Special Autonomy Funds until 2027	ARMM faces financial limitations and fiscal dependency on the central government
Security and Demobilization	GAM disarmed and accepted reintegration	No full disarmament, leading to continued conflicts with MILF and Abu Sayyaf

### *3.4 Comparison of the Agreements*

#### *3.4.1 Legal Framework and Autonomy Implementation*

One of the key differences between the Helsinki MoU and the FPA lies in their legal frameworks and autonomy implementation. The Helsinki MoU was successfully institutionalized through Law No. 11 of 2006 on Aceh Governance, which provided Aceh with significant political, fiscal, and legal autonomy. This allowed Aceh to establish local political parties, enforce Sharia law, and manage its own resources, ensuring a smoother transition to self-governance. In contrast, the FPA's legal foundation Republic Act (RA) 9054, which amended the ARMM's governance structure was weaker and inconsistently applied. The central government retained substantial control over ARMM, limiting its effectiveness in providing genuine autonomy. Many Moro leaders felt that the Philippine government failed to fully honour its commitments, leading to discontent and continued insurgencies.

#### *3.4.2 Political Stability and Local Governance*

Political stability after the agreements varied between Aceh and Mindanao. In Aceh, the Helsinki MoU facilitated the reintegration of former GAM fighters into mainstream politics, allowing them to participate in local elections. Several former GAM leaders became governors and legislators, ensuring that the region's interests were politically represented. This resulted in relatively stable governance, as ex-rebels transitioned from armed conflict to democratic participation.

Conversely, the FPA's political outcome was less stable. While the MNLF was integrated into the national political framework, the agreement failed to include all Moro factions, leading to further divisions. The MILF rejected the FPA and continued fighting, ultimately negotiating a separate agreement with the government in 2014, known as the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). This fragmentation weakened the effectiveness of the FPA and prolonged instability in Mindanao.

#### *3.4.3 Economic and Financial Impact*

The economic and financial arrangements under both agreements also show stark contrasts. The Helsinki MoU secured a Special Autonomy Fund for Aceh until 2027, allowing the region to develop infrastructure, improve public services, and support economic growth. This financial stability enabled Aceh to recover both from conflict and the 2004 tsunami, leading to tangible economic improvements.

In contrast, ARMM under the FPA lacked sufficient financial support, as it remained heavily dependent on national government funding. The central government's reluctance to provide adequate fiscal autonomy hindered ARMM's ability to develop its economy, leaving many communities in poverty and underdevelopment. This economic hardship contributed to continued dissatisfaction among Moro communities and fuelled further insurgency.

#### *3.4.4 Security and Disarmament*

The Helsinki MoU was more effective in ensuring security and disarmament compared to the FPA. Under the MoU, GAM agreed to disarm and demobilize, with many former fighters receiving reintegration support. The Indonesian government also reduced its military presence in Aceh, further easing tensions. As a result, post-agreement violence significantly declined, and Aceh remained largely peaceful.

In contrast, the FPA failed to achieve full disarmament of Moro groups. While the MNLF was integrated into government structures, MILF and other militant groups continued armed resistance. Furthermore, extremist factions such as Abu Sayyaf exploited the situation, engaging in terrorism, kidnappings, and insurgency. The lack of comprehensive disarmament measures in Mindanao led to ongoing instability, with periodic clashes between government forces and rebel groups persisting even after the FPA's signing.

#### *3.4.5 Long-Term Impact and Lessons Learned*

The long-term outcomes of the peace agreements in Aceh and Mindanao underscore the importance of comprehensive implementation, legal robustness, and inclusive political frameworks in post-conflict reconstruction. The Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) proved to be relatively more successful in fostering lasting peace and stability in Aceh. Despite some internal political friction and administrative hurdles, Aceh has experienced a sustained period of peace, marked by improved governance and gradual economic recovery. Key to this success was the institutionalization of the agreement through Law No. 11 of 2006, which granted Aceh substantial autonomy over its local political institutions, natural resources, and legal systems. The availability of Special Autonomy Funds until 2027 provided a stable fiscal foundation for regional development projects, infrastructure improvement, and social welfare programs. Additionally, the effective reintegration of former GAM combatants into civilian life, with many assuming roles in local government, further legitimized the peace process and contributed to political stability.

In contrast, the Final Peace Agreement (FPA) in Mindanao struggled to produce similar results due to several structural and procedural shortcomings. Although the FPA succeeded in integrating elements of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) into national politics and led to the formation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), its implementation was fragmented and lacked a robust legal and financial framework. Crucially, the agreement failed to include or appease key factions such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), which continued armed resistance. The exclusion of significant stakeholders, compounded by weak institutional support and fiscal dependency on the central government, hindered ARMM's capacity to govern effectively and address persistent poverty and underdevelopment in the region. As a result, conflict and instability persisted in Mindanao, creating space for extremist elements like Abu Sayyaf to exploit the governance vacuum.

Recognizing the FPA's limitations, the Philippine government and MILF eventually negotiated the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB), which culminated in the enactment of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) in 2014. This new framework replaced ARMM with the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), aiming to provide a more inclusive, better-resourced, and genuinely autonomous political entity. The evolution from the FPA to the BOL highlights a critical lesson in conflict resolution: peace agreements must be comprehensive, inclusive of all major actors, and supported by sustainable political and economic structures to achieve enduring peace.

Overall, the comparison between Aceh and Mindanao illustrates that the success of post-conflict peacebuilding depends not merely on signing agreements, but on how deeply these agreements are embedded into law, governance, and society. Effective reintegration, fiscal autonomy, inclusive dialogue, and international monitoring are all essential components for ensuring that peace is not only achieved but sustained over time.

## 4. Conclusions

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The comparison of the Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding (2005) and the Final Peace Agreement (1996) reveals that the Helsinki MoU was significantly more successful in achieving sustainable peace in Aceh due to its strong legal foundation, inclusive political integration, sustained fiscal autonomy, and effective disarmament and reintegration mechanisms. In contrast, the FPA in Mindanao was hindered by weak institutional support, exclusion of key factions such as the MILF, financial dependency, and incomplete disarmament, resulting in prolonged instability and necessitating a new agreement through the Bangsamoro Organic Law. A key finding is that stakeholder inclusion and comprehensive implementation are critical to the durability of peace; Aceh's integration of former combatants into political life fostered legitimacy and stability, while Mindanao's fragmented approach undermined the peace process. Based on these findings, future peace agreements should ensure inclusive negotiation processes that involve all significant actors, be grounded in enforceable legal frameworks, provide sufficient fiscal autonomy to address post-conflict recovery, and incorporate robust mechanisms for disarmament and reintegration. Furthermore, tailoring agreements to local governance traditions and ensuring international support and monitoring can enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of peacebuilding efforts.

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