

# The Rohingya Case in Aceh: Indonesia's Role as a Destination for Refugees

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**Abstract:** *Across the globe, states are enacting increasingly anti-migrant policies in the face of growing refugee crises. Indonesia is a prominent example of a country that denies permanent settlement to refugees within its territory. Nonetheless, when Rohingya refugees who fled violence and religious persecution were stranded in the Adaman Sea, fishermen from Indonesia's Aceh province intervened to rescue the refugees when nearby governments, including Indonesia, refused to act. Local Acehnese villagers and NGOs then acted to provide critical emergency shelter and aid to the refugees. This analysis will examine the reasons that motivated the Acehnese to welcome the Rohingya despite the anti-refugee policies of the Indonesian government, and whether these motivations could have been extended in the long term. It will also analyze how Indonesia can use the example set by the Acehnese to expand its own refugee policies and become a more welcoming and open country for the long-term resettlement of refugees.*

**Key Words:** Refugees, Asylum Seekers, Migration, Rohingya, Indonesia

## Introduction

Indonesia is one of the world's most culturally diverse countries. It spans over 17,000 islands.<sup>1</sup> With a population of 267 million, it is the fourth largest country behind only China, India, and the United States.<sup>2</sup> Indonesia's cultural diversity is due in part to its location on a critical economic trade route, which has attracted merchants, traders, and explorers throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> century. A mixture of Arab and Chinese migrants arrived in the mid-1800s and 1900s, and were able to maintain their cultural heritage, which is visible throughout the country today.<sup>3</sup> Currently, ethnic Chinese make up 1.2 percent of Indonesia's population.<sup>4</sup> In Bali, the Hindu religion is prominent, with temples in every village and festivals occurring seemingly every day. While Aceh, Indonesia's western province, is a conservative Muslim region and the only province in the country that operates under Sharia law.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Missbach, Antje, & Wayne Palmer. "Indonesia: A Country Grappling with Migrant Protection at Home and Abroad." *Migration Policy Institute*. September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018.

<https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/indonesiacountry-grappling-migrant-protection-home-and-abroad>.

<sup>2</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Indonesia" *The World Factbook*. February 28, 2020.

<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/id.html>

<sup>3</sup> Antje & Palmer, "Indonesia"

<sup>4</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, "Indonesia"

<sup>5</sup> Varagur, Krithika. "More Rohingya Refugees Arrive in Indonesia's Aceh." *VOA News*. May 7, 2018.

<https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/more-rohingya-refugees-arriveindonesias-aceh>

Despite this rich culture and history, Indonesia's government has historically been unwelcoming to refugees. It is currently not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951 Refugee Convention), and has very limited legal frameworks for the protection of refugees.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the Aceh province has been one of the only places in the world to openly welcome the Rohingya<sup>7</sup>, a stateless and extremely oppressed Muslim minority group from Myanmar. The welcoming sentiments have mostly originated from a custom of hospitality that exists among the Acehnese people. This analysis will examine the reasons and motivations behind why the Acehnese were more welcoming to the Rohingya refugees in contrast to Indonesia as a whole. As well as analyzing whether this welcome can be considered "acceptance", and whether the acceptance of the Rohingya is a sustainable model that can apply for future refugees that arrive in the region and in Indonesia. As climate change causes natural disasters of increased severity and further disrupts the economies of neighboring island states, millions of "climate migrants" will be forced to leave their home countries. Due to its location and large coastlines, Indonesia will likely be caught in the middle, as it has been during previous politically motivated migration crises.<sup>8</sup> The country will need to be prepared for increased migration coming from at-risk countries, especially from South Asia. Overall, this analysis finds that while the time that the Acehnese were exposed to the Rohingya was short-lived, the local people were indeed accepting of the refugees, extended genuine hospitality to the Rohingya based on their own cultural values and beliefs, and greatly overshot their capacity to provide shelter and emergency assistance to the Rohingya. This raises questions about Indonesia's ability – or willingness – to host refugees in the long-term. Based on the experience of the Rohingya in Aceh, Indonesia should improve its own refugee policy by being more open to the reception of refugees, providing better integration in the short-term and long term (e.g. employment opportunities) and developing policies that allow permanent settlement for refugees, rather than simply acting as a transit country.

### **Background: Migration and Refugees in Indonesia**

For decades, Indonesia has been an emigrant-sending country, primarily for labor migration. However, Indonesia also has a history of receiving asylum seekers and refugees. Due to its central location and 34,000 miles of coastline, it has frequently been a transit country for refugees from South and Southeast Asia. Following the Vietnam war, nearly 43,000 Vietnamese and Cambodian asylum seekers remained in Indonesia.<sup>9</sup> This wave of migrants was influential in shaping Indonesia's approach toward refugee resettlement. The country considers itself a transit state for refugees that are awaiting voluntary return to their home countries or resettlement

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<sup>6</sup> Missbach, Antje. "Facets of Hospitality: Rohingya Refugees Temporary Stay in Aceh" *Cornell University Southeast Asia Program*, Indonesia, 104. (October 2017), 42

<sup>7</sup> Varagur, Krithika "They Are Our Brothers: Rohingya Refugees Find Rare Welcome in Aceh." *The Guardian*. May 24, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/may/25/they-are-our-brothers-rohingya-refugees-find-rarewelcome-in-aceh>

<sup>8</sup> Sengupta, Somini and Nadja Popovich. "Global Warming in South Asia: 800 Million at Risk." *The New York Times*. June 28, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/06/28/climate/india-pakistan-warming-hotspots.html>

<sup>9</sup> Missbach and Palmer, "Indonesia"

elsewhere.<sup>10</sup> From 1975 to 1979, the government resettled roughly 200,000 Indochinese refugees, with the assistance of the United States and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)<sup>11</sup> Following the closing of Galang Refugee camps, which held the majority of Vietnamese and Cambodian migrants, 58,000 Afghan and Iranian refugees arrived in Indonesia in response to ongoing conflict in the Middle East between 1996 and 2013.<sup>12</sup> All of these refugees were sent on, by boat, to Australia.

Today, Indonesia maintains a similar mentality toward refugees. The Second Amendment of Indonesia's 1945 Constitution does guarantee the right to political asylum.<sup>13</sup> However, as previously mentioned, the country is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and considers itself only a transit country. Indonesia does not provide any permanent protection for refugees and denies most social, cultural, and economic rights, such as the right to work.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the government gives most responsibility for migrants and refugees to third party organizations, including the UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The UNHCR has operated in Indonesia since 1979 and is the primary agent for refugee resettlement in third countries. The IOM also provides assistance to refugees, including accommodations and "assisted voluntary return" to their countries of origin.<sup>15</sup> The extent of Indonesia's tolerance of refugees is its involvement with the Bali Process, which it co-chairs along with Australia, as well as its commitment to non-refoulement. The Bali Process, however, primarily focuses on preventing transnational crime, rather than increasing protection for refugees.<sup>16</sup>

Despite Indonesia's efforts to avoid integration of refugees in its own territory, many forced migrants have found themselves stuck in Indonesia with very few options due to the Australian government's increasingly anti-migrant policies. Australia, which has been the primary resettlement location for migrants that pass through Indonesia, has refused to process refugees that registered with the UNHCR and were processed in Indonesia after July 1, 2014. It has intercepted and returned boats of refugees en route to Australia back to Indonesia.<sup>17</sup> Further, Australia houses these captured migrants in off-shore Australian-run centers on Manus Islands of Papua New Guinea and on Nauru, which have been called unlawful under international law according to prosecutors at the International Criminal Court due to their "cruel, unhuman, [and] degrading treatment" of migrants.<sup>18</sup> Currently, there are nearly 14,000 refugees in Indonesia,

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<sup>10</sup> McNevin, Anne and Antje Missbach, "Hospitality as a Horizon of Aspiration (or, What the International Refugee Regime Can Learn from Acehese Fisherman)." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31, no. 3 (2018): 295

<sup>11</sup> Missbach and Palmer, "Indonesia"

<sup>12</sup> Missbach and Palmer, "Indonesia"

<sup>13</sup> Dewansyah, Bilal, Dramanda, Wicaksana, and Imam Mulyana. "Asylum Seekers in a Non-Immigrant State and the Absence of Regional Asylum Seekers Mechanism: A Case Study of Rohingya Asylum Seekers in Aceh-Indonesia and Asean Response." *Indonesia Law Review* 3 (2017): 342.

<sup>14</sup> Bilal, Wicaksana, & Mulyana. "Asylum Seekers in a Non-Immigrant State," 357.

<sup>15</sup> McNevin and Missbach, "Hospitality as a Horizon," 296.

<sup>16</sup> McNevin and Missbach, "Hospitality as a Horizon," 294.

<sup>17</sup> McNevin & Missbach, "Hospitality as a Horizon," 295.

<sup>18</sup> Doherty, Ben. "Australia's Offshore Detention is Unlawful, Says International Criminal Court Prosecutor." *The Guardian*. February 14, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/australianews/2020/feb/15/australias-offshore-detention-is-unlawful-says-international-criminal-court-prosecutor>

roughly half of which are from Afghanistan, mainly of the Hazara ethnic group.<sup>19</sup> Refugees among this group, as well as others, find themselves stranded in Indonesia, unwilling to risk or unable to afford the journey by boat to Australia only to be turned away or placed in refugee camps.<sup>20</sup> But with little opportunity to integrate into culture and society in Indonesia. UNHCR officials have warned refugees that their chances of resettlement are becoming increasingly unlikely.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Rohingya Crisis*

Despite Indonesia's low tolerance toward refugees and migrants, Rohingya that have arrived in the country in recent years have had a better experience than most. The Rohingya are a minority Muslim group located primarily in Myanmar. The country has denied the Rohingya recognition as an official ethnic group since 1948, and in 1982, the Rohingya were stripped of their right to citizenship; the government instead refers to the group as illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. Beyond citizenship, the rights of the Rohingya are severely limited in Myanmar, and the group has little access to education, marriage, employment, and religious freedom.<sup>22</sup>

Violence against the group has occurred since 1978, with recent renewed attacks occurring in 2012, 2015, and 2017, which international human rights organizations have referred to as ethnic cleansing.<sup>23</sup> These attacks have forced hundreds of thousands of Rohingya to flee the country in mass waves of migration. The most significant incident of forced migration was in 2017; over 700,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar since August of that year.<sup>24</sup> Though most Rohingya have fled to neighboring Bangladesh, others left by boat to Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia.

### **Aceh and the Rohingya**

The province of Aceh lies on the North Western corner of Indonesia's island of Sumatra, making it an ideal transition point between Myanmar and Australia, or Myanmar and Malaysia. Small groups of Rohingya refugees have been arriving in Aceh Province since 2009 when the first group landed in Sabang, a small island off of Aceh's northern coast, and Kuala Idi.<sup>25</sup> The largest group came in May of 2015, when 1,800 displaced Rohingya were rescued by Acehnese fisherman during the Andaman Sea Crisis, in which thousands of migrants stranded on boats

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<sup>19</sup> Susetyo, Heru. "Afghan Hazra Refugees in Indonesia: In "Transit" or in "Limbo?" *Middle East Institute*. August 21, 2018. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/afghan-hazara-refugeesindonesia-transit-or-limbo>

<sup>20</sup> Lamb, Kate. "Refugees in Indonesia Say Few Would Risk a Boat Ride to Australia." *The Guardian*. February 16, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/australianews/2019/feb/17/refugees-in-indonesia-say-few-would-risk-a-boat-ride-to-australia>

<sup>21</sup> Cochrane, Joe. "Refugees in Indonesia Hoped for a Brief Stay. Many May be Stuck for Life." *The New York Times*. January 26, 2018. Accessed March 1, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/world/asia/indonesia-refugees-united-nations.html>

<sup>22</sup> Albert, Eleanor Lindsay Maizland. "The Rohingya Crisis" *Council on Foreign Relations*. January 23, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/rohingya-crisis>

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Burma: End 'Ethnic Cleansing' of Rohingya Muslims." April 22, 2013. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/04/22/burma-end-ethnic-cleansing-rohingya-muslims#>

<sup>24</sup> Council on Foreign Relations. "Global Conflict Tracker." March 6, 2020. <https://www.cfr.org/interactive/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/rohingya-crisis-myanmar>

<sup>25</sup> Dewansayah, Dramanda, and Mulyana, "Asylum Seekers in a Non-Immigrant State", 354

traveling from Myanmar were refused permission to land in Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia.<sup>26</sup> Authorities from these countries provided the migrants with fuel, water, and food, only to return the vessels to sea. Between May 10<sup>th</sup> and May 20<sup>th</sup>, the Acehnese intervened to rescue the migrants, despite warnings from the government that by doing so they would be in violation of state law. After the rescues, attitudes toward these groups of migrants shifted, and Indonesia and Malaysia announced that they would allow the Rohingya to seek temporary protection for one year until they could be returned or resettled by the international community.<sup>27</sup> This rescue has not been an isolated incident; much smaller groups of Rohingya were also rescued by Acehnese fishermen in 2018.<sup>28</sup>

### *Why Aceh was more receptive to refugees*

The reaction to the Rohingya was much different in Aceh than the overall sentiment toward refugees in Indonesia. The local community has a generally positive view of the population and, for the most part, expresses a sincere desire to help. Beyond the initial rescue by the Acehnese fisherman, local villages were receptive and welcoming of the refugees. Typically, refugees in Indonesia draw distrust and suspicion, which can sometimes lead to violence among Indonesians.<sup>29</sup> The Rohingya were given a much warmer embrace in Aceh and were the recipients of more donations and public support than any other refugee group in Indonesia. Upon their arrival, Acehnese villages provided the Rohingya with shelter, food, proper sanitation, and comfort. Further, volunteers from across Aceh collected donations of food, clothing, and toys throughout the streets of their villages and in mosques. While the villages lacked the capacity to provide for all of the needs of the Rohingya, they contributed as many resources as possible. Further, personal relationships developed among the refugees and local villagers, particularly the fisherman who rescued them at sea. Fishermen, as well as some other local Acehnese frequently visited the Rohingya in camps and developed friendships through the exchange of gifts.<sup>30</sup>

Not only were local villagers welcoming, but local governments and NGOs utilized resources to create shelters and acted quickly to provide emergency assistance to the Rohingya, despite the views of the national government. The refugees were originally housed in emergency shelters, but the local government quickly established four camps in the city of Langsa, East Aceh, and North Aceh.<sup>31</sup> Langsa's government also established a task force for dealing with assistance, assigning roles to social agencies to manage aid and build additional temporary shelters.

There are several theories as to why the Acehnese were more receptive to the Rohingya than the country as a whole is toward refugees. A common theory that is often cited in the media is that the sentiment came from a form of "Muslim solidarity." Nonetheless, the Muslim religion is not unique to Aceh, as Indonesia has the largest Muslim population in the world. Another theory, which is unique to Aceh, is that the local people felt a form of solidarity due to their own

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<sup>26</sup> McNevin and Missbach, "Hospitality," 295.

<sup>27</sup> McNevin and Missbach, "Hospitality as a Horizon," 296.

<sup>28</sup> Suryono, Mitra. "Indonesian Fishermen Rescue Rohingya." *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees*. May 30, 2018. <https://www.unhcr.org/enus/news/latest/2018/5/5b0e962c4/indonesian-fishermen-rescue-rohingya.html>

<sup>29</sup> McNevin and Missbach, "Hospitality as a Horizon," 296.

<sup>30</sup> Missbach, "Facets of Hospitality," 50.

<sup>31</sup> Missbach, "Facets of Hospitality," 49.

history of seeking refuge during the Aceh Conflict from 1976 to 2004, and following the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004.<sup>32</sup> This coincides with the idea of hospitality, which is central to Acehese culture, and likely played a large role in the reaction to the Rohingya. Lastly, it has been suggested that political motive was behind the local government response, in part because of historic tensions between Aceh and the central government of Indonesia.<sup>33</sup> None of these theories was the sole reasoning for the response of the Acehese; however, some had a stronger influence than the others.

### *Religion*

The most widely discussed theory in the media of why the Acehese were accepting of the Rohingya is religion and the moral responsibilities of Islam, which incited empathy among the Acehese. In several news and research articles, Acehese are quoted describing Rohingya refugees as their “Muslim brothers.”<sup>34</sup> In some camps, locals would join the Rohingya to conduct prayers five times a day by singing the Muslim call to prayer and leading refugees in prayer.<sup>35</sup> Volunteers would also teach Rohingya how to read the Quran.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, this theory is inherently flawed, considering Indonesia is home to approximately 272 million Muslims; the largest population in the world.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, it is difficult to explain why there would be a strong sense of Muslim solidarity in Aceh, but not in the other provinces of Indonesia. It has been suggested that this idea was pushed by political candidates who were linked to the NGOs operating within Rohingya camps as a way to build support for their political agendas before upcoming local elections.<sup>38</sup> Further, the strict following of Sharia Law caused some tension between the locals and the Rohingya, which led to some marriages of Rohingya refugees in shelters, including some underage girls, because local Acehese NGOs saw co-habitation in shelters as sinful.<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, a common feature that the Acehese share with the Rohingya is that both groups are Sunni Muslim, unlike other Muslim refugees in Indonesia from the Middle East, and share other cultural similarities with the Acehese.<sup>40</sup> These aspects likely did have some factor of influence over how the Acehese responded to their Rohingya visitors. If Muslim solidarity did play a role in the Acehese acceptance of the Rohingya, the question that arises is therefore whether refugee identity matters. In other words, would the Acehese be equally as accepting of refugees who are not Muslim? The answer to this question, and perhaps a stronger case for the reasoning behind Acehese acceptance, is that the reaction to the Rohingya in Aceh was more likely due to the idea of hospitality that is engrained in Acehese culture.

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<sup>32</sup> Missbach, “Facets of Hospitality,” 49.

<sup>33</sup> McNevin and Missbach, “Hospitality as a Horizon,” 297.

<sup>34</sup> Varagur, “They Are Our Brothers”

<sup>35</sup> Varagur, “They Are Our Brothers”

<sup>36</sup> Malahayati, Malahayati, Rasyid, Laila M., and Hadi Iskander. “Minimal Protection of Rohingya Refugees (A Moral Approach in Aceh).” *International Conference on Social Sciences, Humanities, Economics and Law*. doi 10.4108/eai.5-9-2018.2280979 (January 2019)

<sup>37</sup> Central Intelligence Agency, “Indonesia”

<sup>38</sup> McNevin and Missbach, “Hospitality as a Horizon,” 297.

<sup>39</sup> Missbach, “Facets of Hospitality,” 51.

<sup>40</sup> Missbach, “Facets of Hospitality,” 58.

### *Hospitality and Acehnese culture*

The theory that is most often cited in literature is that the Acehnese were accepting toward the Rohingya because of the local custom of *peumulia jamee*, which translates to “honoring one’s guests” and has a broader meaning of welcoming strangers to Aceh.<sup>41</sup> Unlike Islam, this idea of hospitality is unique to Aceh, and they take great pride in this aspect of their culture. The central idea is that extending hospitality and following the code of *peumulia jamee* will bring good fortune, while failing to follow will bring misfortune. This sentiment can be seen clearly in the decision of the Acehnese fishermen to rescue the Rohingya stranded at sea. One fisherman, when describing his decision, stated, “They are human. We have to help other humans.”<sup>42</sup> He then went on to explain that he expected to be rewarded by the gods with more fish for the money that he lost while completing the rescue. This idea of being rewarded for hospitality is central to *peumulia jamee*. Another fisherman told a journalist after the rescue that “we helped out of solidarity. If we find someone in the ocean, we have to help them no matter what . . . we could not avoid it.”<sup>43</sup> This response incorporates the idea that helping those in need is seen as an obligation under *peumulia jamee*.

The culture of hospitality was also extended to the Rohingya at the village level. Villages across Aceh, not only villages where refugees first landed, contributed donations of food, toys, and clothing, while local mosques donated hijabs and sarongs. Acehnese youth also became involved with assisting the refugees. Youth volunteers were quoted saying they were helping “because it’s [their] duty as Acehnese.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a village head claimed that it was the right thing to do to offer help to the Rohingya, and that they “only look at the souls of those in need; their identities remained irrelevant.”<sup>45</sup> Based on this mindset, the villages extended welcome to the Rohingya based on their humanity alone, regardless of status or whether they imposed a burden, and not based on the fact that they shared a religion.

### *Solidarity in Time of Need*

It is also suggested that the sentiment of wanting to provide assistance to the Rohingya extends beyond culture; it is rooted in Aceh’s history of conflict and disaster, in which the Acehnese also sought help from the international community. While this feeling of solidarity with those in need may be an extension of *peumulia jamee*, it also warrants analysis as its own theory due to Aceh’s unique experience with loss. Aceh experienced a violent conflict between 1976 to 2003, when the security forces of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka – GAM) fought over GAM’s desire to secede from Indonesia and create a sovereign and independent Acehnese state. Consequently, thousands of Acehnese were forcibly displaced by government forces and sought protections in countries such as Malaysia and the United States. The Aceh saw welcoming the Rohingya as a way to reciprocate the help that had been given to them in a time of need and to empathize with an oppressed group of people.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> McNevin and Missbach, “Hospitality as a Horizon,” 298.

<sup>42</sup> McNevin and Missbach, “Hospitality as a Horizon,” 298.

<sup>43</sup> McNevin and Missbach, “Hospitality as a Horizon,” 298.

<sup>44</sup> Varagur, “They Are Our Brothers”

<sup>45</sup> McNevin and Missbach, “Hospitality as a Horizon,” 298.

<sup>46</sup> McNevin and Missbach, “Hospitality as a Horizon,” 299.

Many Acehnese are also empathetic to the situation of the Rohingya, as they themselves have experienced severe disaster. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami had the most devastating impact on Aceh; across the province, 170,000 residents were killed and 500,000 were left homeless.<sup>47</sup> It is difficult to find someone in the province who did not lose someone close to them, particularly in Banda Aceh, the capitol of the province, which was all but completely destroyed. Many feel the weight of living through a disaster and want to help others in need. One survivor of the tragedy stated, “I’m a survivor of the tsunami too, like many people in Aceh . . . We all know what it is like to live through a disaster.”<sup>48</sup> Further, following the tsunami, Aceh received huge amounts of aid from the international community; providing assistance to the Rohingya was seen as a way to pay this back. While the culturally engrained aspect of hospitality likely played a larger role in the acceptance of the Rohingya, the feeling of tremendous loss cuts very deep for the Acehnese, which is evident from the thoughtfully designed Tsunami Museum in Banda Aceh, which serves as both a symbolic reminder of what was lost as well as an emergency shelter in case a similar tragedy ever occurs. It is highly likely that the shared experience among the Acehnese made them more empathetic toward the Rohingya.

### *Political and Economic Motives*

Lastly, while it is fair to claim that the local Acehnese welcome of the Rohingya came from a place of genuine compassion, it would be naïve to say without caveats that the motives of all stakeholders were the same. There was also at least somewhat of a political and economic motive behind the actions of the local government, NGOs, and local media. Firstly, there are still existing political sentiments within Aceh in favor of secession from Indonesia. Welcoming Rohingya refugees and crafting policies to accommodate them was seen by some as an act of disobedience against the central governance, which brings a level of pride to the Acehnese.<sup>49</sup>

Additionally, the local government received funding from NGOs such as the UNHCR and the IOM to support the Rohingya. While this funding was necessary for providing ongoing support to the Rohingya, portions were also used for spin-off projects and as unofficial income for government officials who may have been up for local elections. For local media, the image of “Acehnese goodness” was utilized as a way to garner a positive international image and cover up human rights abuses from the conservative religious government.<sup>50</sup> However, the motives of local government, NGOs, and local media should be separated from the response of the local villages. Considering the majority of villages throughout Aceh are poor, and Acehnese families provided assistance to the Rohingya despite their own limited access to resources, it is arguably more likely that locals were motivated by cultural sentiments of hospitality and genuine empathy and compassion than any political or economic factor.

### **Defining “Acceptance” among Acehnese**

It is not one single theory that led the Acehnese to welcome the Rohingya, but a combination of a feeling of Muslim solidarity, culturally engrained hospitality, empathy toward a displaced and oppressed population, and in some cases, political motives. The most prominent

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<sup>47</sup> Pan, Esther. “Indonesia: The Aceh Peace Agreement.” September 15, 2005.

<https://www.cfr.org/background/indonesia-aceh-peace-agreement>

<sup>48</sup> Varagur, “They Are Our Brothers”

<sup>49</sup> Missbach, “Facets of Hospitality,” 59.

<sup>50</sup> McNevin and Missbach, “Hospitality as a Horizon,” 298.

influence, based on reactions and responses from Acehese citizens, is the custom of *peumulia jamee*, which requires honoring one's guests and welcoming strangers. Nonetheless, the shared religion was likely a contributing factor, at least after the initial rescue and response, as to why the Acehese were friendly toward the Rohingya and tolerated their stay in the community. The shared experience of Islam gave the Acehese and Rohingya a reason to connect beyond the rescuer-rescuee relationship that may not exist for another refugee group. Nonetheless, the Acehese were able to identify themselves in the Rohingya because they too had experience fleeing and recovering from disasters and persecution. While it is true political reasons were a motive for some, it is difficult to say this played a large role for all Acehese based on the amount of resources and funds that were mobilized in comparison to the capacity of the local government and villagers.

Nonetheless, while the Acehese were welcoming to the Rohingya because of these factors, this does not necessarily translate to acceptance, as the Rohingya were not given the opportunity to settle permanently in the province. By the end of 2015, only approximately 200 Rohingya remained in Aceh; the rest had either left, presumably via smugglers to Malaysia in search of work, or had been re-located. By December of 2016, the Indonesian government had relocated all remaining Rohingya to Medan.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, it is difficult to assess the level of Acehese acceptance in the long-term. Nonetheless, in the short term, the capacity of the Acehese people, most of whom are living in poverty, to help the Rohingya was vastly overshot; this did not deter locals and villagers from doing what they considered their responsibility under Acehese culture. Further, the lack of integration opportunities for Rohingya was not the fault of the local people, but the federal government that refuses to provide long-term protection and resettlement opportunities for refugees, including employment opportunities. Local NGOs could have also done more to ensure greater opportunities for long-term residence for the Rohingya, such as improving shelters, which were labeled as inadequate by visitors from international NGOs.<sup>52</sup>

There were, however, instances of tension between the Rohingya and the local Acehese. In September of 2015, a group of Rohingya stormed out of a refugee camp in response to allegations of rapes and beatings by locals.<sup>53</sup> Acehese in some instances, mainly NGO staff and volunteers, referred to Rohingya as being "ungrateful" and deemed some as not complying with the rules of hospitality for selling items in care packages to earn extra cash.<sup>54</sup> Other than these few instances, the Acehese were, for the most part, genuinely friendly toward the Rohingya and concerned with helping a population in need. Therefore, based on the brief period that the groups were exposed, the Acehese do appear to be accepting of the Rohingya. It is highly likely that if the Rohingya had been given the opportunity to stay and fully assimilate into Acehese culture and society, the acceptance would have been extended in the long term. In fact, some Acehese claimed to be in favor of the possibility of long-term integration for the Rohingya if they could become part of the local society, and thus would no longer depend on aid from the government and local villages.<sup>55</sup> Thus, apart from tensions with some groups of Rohingya, the Acehese

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<sup>51</sup> Dewansyah, Dramanda, and Mulyana, "Asylum Seekers in a Non-Immigrant State" 358.

<sup>52</sup> Missbach, "Facets of Hospitality," 50.

<sup>53</sup> Missbach, "Facets of Hospitality," 50.

<sup>54</sup> Missbach, "Facets of Hospitality," 51.

<sup>55</sup> Missbach, "Facets of Hospitality," 58.

should be considered as accepting to the Rohingya, especially in comparison to Indonesia as a whole.

The question remains as to whether Indonesia can build on the Acehese model to improve its efforts to accommodate more refugees, as well as provide more permanent settlement to the asylum seekers that are already living within its borders. However, before analyzing whether Indonesia and the broader international community can learn from the case of the Acehese, it is important to consider whether this same level of hospitality would have been extended to other migrant groups or could be similarly applied to refugees who are not Rohingya. Based on the theories of Acehese acceptance, it is not a stretch to assume the Acehese would respond similarly to another migrant group, considering the custom of Acehese hospitality requires welcoming strangers regardless of who they are.<sup>56</sup> Further, fleeing dangerous and violent situations is a universal characteristic of forced-migrant populations, and one that the Acehese would be able to identify with beyond the Rohingya. This theory was tested in June of 2016, when a boat of 43 Sri Lankan asylum seekers neared the coast in Aceh. While Indonesian authorities first refused entry to the boat, local NGO pressure led the Indonesian government to allow the boat to land days later, and the IOM and UNHCR were able to work to shelter the Sri Lankans under similar circumstances as the Rohingya.<sup>57</sup> While Acehese acceptance has yet to be tested on a large scale, they are a group of people that are culturally bound by hospitality, and who take great pride in being kind and welcoming. Whether or not the exact actions of the Rohingya can be replicated across the globe, the sentiments of acceptance, compassion, and empathy, can certainly be improved in many countries in regard to refugee crises.

### **Indonesia as a welcoming country**

It is impossible to claim that the model in Aceh can be replicated on a larger scale to encompass the entire country of Indonesia considering that only 1,500 to 1,800 Rohingya temporarily resided in Aceh for a few months, and that this number shrunk to 200 by the end of 2015.<sup>58</sup> This was a relatively short test of the Acehese ability to welcome refugees in the long term. Further Aceh is not without its own problems in the eyes of the international community and should not be regarded as the poster for the protection of human rights. The government is known to crack down on same-sex couples, and publicly cane citizens who are caught in extramarital relationships.<sup>59</sup> Outside of these human rights abuses by government officials, the people of Aceh are inherently empathetic and caring, and the cultural component of hospitality can and should be applied on a broader scale across the country. In some instances, the small actions of the Acehese have already had an impact. While the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia initially refused entry to Rohingya boats, following the rescue by Acehese fishermen, they quickly shifted their policies. Malaysia agreed to stop deterring boats and to provide shelter to 3,000 people. Following this announcement, both Indonesia and Malaysia announced that their governments would provide shelter for the Rohingya for one year until they could be resettled by

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<sup>56</sup> McNevin and Missbach, "Hospitality as a Horizon," 301.

<sup>57</sup> McNevin and Missbach, "Hospitality as a Horizon," 297.

<sup>58</sup> Dewansyah, Dramanda, and Mulyana, "Asylum Seekers in a Non-Immigrant State," 358.

<sup>59</sup> Davies, Ed. "Indonesia's Aceh Resumes Public Caning Despite Pledge to Curb Access." *Reuters*. July 13, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-aceh-caning/indonesias-acehresumes-public-caning-despite-pledge-to-curb-access-idUSKBN1K31N1>.

the UNHCR.<sup>60</sup> While this was an unrealistic time frame, it showed a change in policy that was a direct result of hospitality extended by the Acehnese.

Though compassion and respect for human rights are crucial for crafting effective refugee policies, refugee resettlement goes beyond empathy. It also requires providing adequate funds and developing the appropriate systems for resource mobilization. In the case of Aceh, this was handled remarkably well considering the capacity of the local government and villages. Indonesia and the international community should look to the Acehnese example when searching for ways to provide for refugees using few resources. Poverty is extremely prevalent in Aceh; nonetheless, poor villages provided assistance to the Rohingya far beyond what their local economies could allow. One small village of 1,500 people coordinated to quickly provide food, hygiene, and clothes to 500 migrants until assistance could be provided by local authorities, despite challenges they already faced sustaining themselves.<sup>61</sup> Though this example is difficult to compare to a large-scale refugee crisis, such as that from Syria or the Rohingya fleeing to Bangladesh, the extreme generosity of the Rohingya does warrant the question as to whether Indonesia and other receiving countries are overstating their lack of resources available to take in refugees.

Indonesia will continue to see migrants from South and South East Asia arriving by sea, particularly in the coming decades as climate change exacerbates the situations of many already desperate populations, and climate migration becomes a more pressing global challenge. The world has already witnessed an increase in the number of climate migrants being forcibly displaced by extreme weather events. In 2017, approximately 24 million people were displaced by sudden weather events, such as flooding, forest fires brought on by drought, and intense storms.<sup>62</sup> The World Bank has estimated that by 2050, the living conditions for 800 million people in six South Asian countries could diminish severely, which will likely prompt increases in migration from these countries.<sup>63</sup> These include countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, all of which have already had waves of migrants arrive at some point in Indonesia. These trends will likely continue, and Indonesia must be prepared to provide more than temporary shelter and aid to these migrant populations. In addition to the likely increase in migrants in the coming decades, the world is facing increasingly anti-refugee and anti-migrant policies. The United States, which until President Trump took office was the top destination in the world for the resettlement of refugees, pledged to accept only 18,000 migrants in 2020, down from 110,000 that were allowed in 2016.<sup>64</sup> Further, as Australia increases its deterrence policies to prevent boats of people seeking asylum landing on its shores, Indonesia will have fewer options when it comes to re-locating refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>65</sup>

None of the above examples can be used as a direct comparison between Aceh and Indonesia or the international community as a whole. Though hospitality among the Acehnese

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<sup>60</sup> Missbach & McNevin, "Hospitality as a Horizon," 296

<sup>61</sup> Missbach & McNevin, "Hospitality as a Horizon," 305.

<sup>62</sup> Podesta, John. "The Climate Crisis, Migration, and Refugees." *Brookings Institute*. July 25, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/>

<sup>63</sup> Sengupta and Popovich, "Global Warming in South Asia."

<sup>64</sup> Shear, Michael D. and Zolan Kanno-Youngs. "Trump Slashes Refugee Cap to 18,000, Curtailing U.S. Role as Haven." September 26, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/26/us/politics/trump-refugees.html>

<sup>65</sup> Isaacs, Mark. "Australia's Draconian Refugee Policy Comes Home to Roost." *Foreign Policy*. November 21, 2018. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/11/21/australias-draconian-refugee-policy-comes-home-to-roost-瑙鲁- Manus-Island-offshore-detention-scott-morrison-asylum-seekers/>

saved the lives of thousands of Rohingya when no surrounding governments would step in, hospitality cannot act as a substitute for laws that provide legal protection, status, and work opportunities for the Rohingya. While the Acehnese did their best so they could assist the refugees, operating without laws and an understanding of the rights of refugees can put their safety at risk. Recently, Indonesia has made improvements in its refugee policies; in 2016, President Jokowi Widodo issued Presidential Decree No. 125 on the Treatment of Refugees Overseas, which uses the term refugees as it is written in the 1951 Refugee Convention, lays out Indonesia's duty to rescue migrants at sea, and provides a unified response for all government agencies.<sup>66</sup> However, the decree confirms Indonesia's stance that asylum seekers are only allowed to remain in Indonesia temporarily, and must be relocated to third countries.

Indonesia must make improvements to better accommodate and protect the refugees that are currently living within its borders, and those that will arrive in the future. While the first step should be to become a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, this alone will not be enough, considering that signatory states, including the U.S. and Australia, are increasingly pushing the limits of what can be allowed under the convention. Indonesia must also implement policies, such as resident permits, that can allow refugees to become permanent residents in Indonesia and have access to the same rights as Indonesian citizens, including employment opportunities, education, and healthcare. The main reason why Rohingya did not stay in Aceh long term is because of the lack of work opportunities. By providing access to services, Indonesia can create better opportunities for cultural integration among refugees, which will help prevent further human smuggling to countries like Malaysia where refugees are also not allowed formal employment, but many Rohingya have found work in the informal sector.<sup>67</sup> The case of the Rohingya in Aceh demonstrated what works and what does not in refugee integration, and in formulating refugee policies, Indonesia should use Aceh province as a model to craft more sustainable policies that will provide greater protections for refugees.

## Conclusion

The case of how the Acehnese handled a sudden arrival of Rohingya refugees is an important example to consider when thinking about broader refugee policies. Despite its limited capacity, Aceh was able to not only rescue Rohingya stranded at sea when they had been abandoned by surrounding governments, but also to provide temporary shelter and assistance that came from both local villages as well as local authorities and NGOs. Of the reasoning for why the Acehnese were willing to go to great lengths to protect the Rohingya, the most compelling factors are that they felt solidarity with the refugees because of their own regional history, and because of their cultural value of hospitality which drove them to welcome strangers at all costs. Indonesia on a national level has historically been much less welcoming to refugees. Despite its reluctance to allow refugees to remain in the country long-term, Indonesia has frequently been a transit country, where many migrants have waited for transfer to Australia. Facing increasing pressure from climate change and a growing anti-refugee sentiment across the globe, Indonesia must act to improve its refugee policies and create opportunities for long-term residency and integration. By using its own Aceh province as an example, Indonesia can craft refugee policies that better accommodate the needs of refugees, and that provide the opportunity for long term

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<sup>66</sup> Missbach, "Facets of Hospitality," 43.

<sup>67</sup> Dewansyah, Dramanda, and Mulyana, "Asylum Seekers in a Non-Immigrant State," 358.

integration. By becoming a safer destination for asylum seekers, Indonesia can set an example for other South East Asian countries and for the rest of the international community.

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