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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Local Political Symbolism in Spaces of Crisis: The Reactivation of the Bulan-Bintang Flag at Flood Sites in Aceh

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Abstract: Flood disasters in Aceh have generated a significant sociopolitical phenomenon mark by the reactivation of the Bulan-Bintang flag as an instrument of public articulation amid a humanitarian crisis. This phenomenon challenges the literature on disaster governance and post-conflict studies, which often overlook how latent symbols of resistance are reanimated in response to the state's functional failure. This article explores spatial, affective, and digital dimensions in order to understand the transformation of historical memory into a contemporary language of protest. The research employs a visual ethnographic approach combined with Peircean semiotic analysis. The findings indicate that the public display of this flag does not constitute an attempt to revive separatism; rather, it represents a form of post-conflict symbolic protest. Through performative practices, local residents reframe collective memory, shifting the meaning of the symbol from "armed resistance" into a "flag of disappointment" in response to the state's absence in addressing disaster impacts in several areas of Aceh. This study concludes that the resolution of political conflict does not automatically eliminate the potential reactivation of symbols, particularly when the state fails to fulfil its fundamental responsibilities.
Keywords: Political Symbolism; Memory Reactivation; Disaster Governance; Symbolic Protest; Aceh

***Abstrak**: Bencana banjir di Aceh memicu fenomena sosiopolitik krusial melalui reaktivasi bendera bulan-bintang sebagai instrumen artikulasi publik di tengah krisis kemanusiaan. Fenomena ini menantang literatur disaster governance dan studi pasca-konflik yang sering mengabaikan bagaimana simbol perlawanan laten dihidupkan kembali sebagai respons atas kegagalan fungsional negara. Artikel ini mengeksplorasi dimensi spasial, afektif, dan digital guna memahami transformasi memori historis menjadi bahasa protes kontemporer.Penelitian dilakukan menggunakan pendekatan etnografi visual dan analisis semiotika Peirce. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pengibaran bendera ini bukanlah upaya kebangkitan separatisme, melainkan bentuk protes simbolik pasca-konflik. Warga membingkai ulang memori kolektif secara performatif, mengubah makna simbol dari "perlawanan bersenjata" menjadi "bendera kekecewaan" atas absennya negara dalam mengatasi bencana di beberapa wilayah Aceh. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa resolusi konflik politik tidak serta-merta menghapus potensi reaktivasi simbol jika negara gagal memenuhi tanggung jawab dasarnya.*
***Kata kunci**: Simbolisme Politik, Reaktivasi Memori, Disaster Governance, Protes Simbolik, Aceh*

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1. Introduction

The reactivation of political symbols in post-conflict regions is frequently emerged by the state's failure to manage humanitarian crises effectively. In North Aceh, the public display of the Bulan-Bintang flag at flood sites in December 2025 constituted a concrete manifestation of such tensions, as a symbol historically associated with the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) was once again hoisted amid floodwaters (Ikhwanudin, 2025). This reactivation emerged in response to what many local residents perceived as the government's delayed response to the disaster, which damaged thousands of homes and displaced large numbers of residents. The viral video documenting this act did not merely represent an assertion of local identity; rather, it reflected a performative expression of collective dissatisfaction with bureaucratic aid mechanisms. Therefore, the public display of the flag should be read as a political statement that strategically mobilised disaster space aimed at attracting national attention. Ultimately, failures in disaster governance generate conditions under which collective memories of resistance may be reactivated and re-signified within Acehnese society (Juli & Fazil, 2025).

Studies on post-conflict political symbolism have been widely conducted; however, the existing literature continues to exhibits a significant gap in explaining the mechanisms of symbolic reactivation within contexts of non-political crises. Previous research by Little (2017) and Atabay et al. (2024) has primarily emphasized processes of memorialisation and reconciliation, portraying them as gradual and stable. In contrast, disaster governance literature, such as that by Hilhorst et al. (2020), foregrounds technical and institutional dimensions, while frequently neglecting the political aspects of visual protest articulated by affected communities. As a result, a conceptual void persists regarding how symbols of resistance that have been effectively "dormant" under peace agreements may be situationally reactivated as a language of protest directed at the state. This article seeks to address this gap by analysing the transformation of symbolic meaning from narratives of separatism into instruments of public accountability claims.

The primary objective of this study is to analyse the mechanisms underlying the situational reactivation of the Bulan-Bintang flag as a form of symbolic protest within spaces of crisis in Aceh. Specifically, it examines how local communities reframe the flag's meaning from a historical symbol of armed resistance into a medium of political communication addressing state failure. Employing a visual ethnographic approach combined with Peircean semiotic analysis, the study investigates three principal pathways of reactivation: the spatial dimension at disaster sites, the affective dimension involving traumatic memory, and the digital dimension mediated through social media virality. By addressing how the symbolic meaning of Bulan-Bintang is transformed in these contexts, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamic relationship between society and the state in a post-conflict setting. Furthermore, this analysis highlights how ecological crises can reshape the symbolic ecology of a region still navigating the processes of peace transition.

This article proceeds from the argument that the reactivation of the Bulan–Bintang flag at flood sites in Aceh constitutes a manifestation of a "situational symbolic transformation," in which a symbol historically associated with separatism is repurposed as an instrument of non-violent protest addressing failures in disaster governance. This shift demonstrates that symbolic reactivation does not signify the revival of an insurgent movement; rather, it represents a form of symbolic claim-making that mobilises collective memory to express distrust in the state and to articulate demands for accountability. Theoretically, the study extends the concept of symbolic resistance by introducing the mechanism of "situational reactivation," whereby historical symbols are reutilised without their original political agenda. Empirically, the research highlights that post-Helsinki peace

remains fragile if the fundamental social contract is not upheld during crises. Practically, these findings underscore the importance for policymakers of implementing disaster governance strategies that are sensitive to sociopolitical contexts in post-conflict regions in order to prevent the erosion of public trust.

2. Literature review

Studies on political dynamics in post-conflict regions have expanded considerably, particularly within the fields of conflict resolution, political sociology, and disaster governance. Early research predominantly focused on the transformation of combatants into formal political actors and on institutional stability following peace agreements (Froitzheim & Schierenbeck, 2022; Tuncel & Manning, 2023; Fernando et al., 2025). Over the past decade, approaches to this phenomenon have shifted, moving beyond conceptualising peace solely as an administrative–bureaucratic process to analysing how conflict memory and political symbolism persist and are reactivated within spaces of crisis (Gutman, 2017; Nets-Zehngut & Bar-Tal, 2014). Across the existing literature, three primary tendencies can be identified: (1) studies grounded in political symbolism and resistance, (2) research oriented towards disaster governance, and (3) analyses of post-conflict political transformation. These three approaches offer distinct perspectives on why historical symbols may resurface amid natural disaster situations.

The political symbolism approach views the use of visual signs not merely as passive representations but as performative acts that actively shape political reality. This perspective emphasises how symbols possess the capacity to crystallise complex collective emotions into instruments for marginalised groups (Chiera, 2015; Johansen et al., 2025). Research by Adler and Kohn (2023) demonstrates that, in the context of protest, symbols such as colours or flags serve as a shared language that unites movements without necessitating physical violence. Similar findings are reported by Herath et al. (2020), who regard symbols as instruments for constructing counter-narratives to state domination. While this approach provides a precise account of actor agency, it frequently overlooks how environmental crises or natural disasters function as primary triggers that facilitate the reactivation of symbols previously dormant or prohibited.

The disaster politics approach emphasises that disasters are not merely natural events but moments that reveal governance failures and power relations between the state and society. Studies within this category have extensively examined how public dissatisfaction with aid distribution and the delayed response of government response can catalyse protest movements (Andreastuti et al., 2019; Bridge & Li, 2025). Hilhorst et al. (2020) observe that disaster crises generate “political spaces” in which communities begin to question state legitimacy and demand accountability through non-formal channels. Moreover, in regions with history of conflict, inadequate disaster assistance is frequently interpreted by local populations as systematic neglect by central authorities. Collectively, this perspective demonstrates that protests at disaster sites are not merely expressions of physical suffering but represent profound political critiques of a fractured social contract.

The post-conflict political transformation approach emphasizes on the transition of resistance actors’ identities into the formal democratic system. Studies in Aceh indicate that the peace process has successfully integrated former combatants into local government structures, yet it has left symbolic residues that remain unresolved (Bachri et al., 2023; Sustikarini, 2019). Gyollai (2025) highlights that collective memory of past struggles persists within informal spaces, constituting a latent identity. The success of formal peace is often not accompanied by the eradication of communities’ emotional attachments to historical symbols. From this perspective, the re-emergence of past symbols in public spaces can be

understood as an expression of historical memories that have not been fully accommodated within state-driven narratives of peace.

Although the three approaches outlined above offer valuable insights, several research gaps remain that warrant attention. Studies on political symbolism tend to focus on active social movements while overlooking the context of post-conflict regions experiencing disasters. Disaster politics research places excessive emphasis on structural and institutional dimensions, thereby insufficiently addressing the symbolic and cultural aspects of how communities protest state failures. Meanwhile, post-conflict studies in Aceh often treat symbols of resistance as part of the past, legally resolved through special autonomy regulations (Aksa et al., 2023; Wijatmoko et al., 2023). Consequently, a more holistic approach is required to understand how non-political crises, such as floods, can trigger the "situational reactivation" of historical symbols of resistance as a novel form of political communication.

This study seeks to address these gaps by proposing the concept of "crisis-activated symbolic reactivation." Employing a visual ethnographic and combine with Peircean semiotic analysis, it examines how communities at flood sites in Aceh actively employ the Bulan-Bintang flag to reframe their demands towards the state (Solovyov, 2022). By integrating perspectives from political symbolism, disaster politics, and post-conflict studies, the article contributes not only to academic debates on peace resilience but also provides critical insights for disaster governance policies that are more sensitive to historical and political contexts in transitional regions.

3. Method

This study employs a visual ethnographic design with an interpretive qualitative approach to examine the phenomenon of the Bulan-Bintang flag reactivation in Aceh. This design was selected given that the reactivation of symbols is inherently visual and performative, requiring an in-depth understanding of the "social life of images" within a crisis context. According to Barley and Russell (2019), visual ethnography enables researchers to capture how visual objects are produced and ascribed meaning within specific sociopolitical spaces. Methodologically, the flag is positioned not merely as an inert object but as a communicative act through which communities articulate their response to state failure. This process involves recording interactions among residents, the symbol, and the flood-affected environment to understand how visuality constructs non-violent political protest. Through this approach, the researcher can conduct a detailed observation of the spatial and affective dimensions encompassing the use of historical symbols of resistance.

The material object of this study is the phenomenon of the Bulan-Bintang flag being displayed at flood sites in Aceh, regarded as a political artefact within a crisis space. Focusing on this object is essential since the flag is not merely a piece of cloth but a symbol carrying the historical weight of past conflict, which has been transformed into a medium of contemporary protest (Jeziorowska, 2012). The researcher observed the flag in multiple forms, ranging from its physical presence on emergency poles to its digital representations on residents' mobile screens. Methodologically, the object was analysed in relation to its placement in strategic locations, such as damaged bridges or isolated residential areas. By establishing the flag as a material object, the study traces how symbols of past resistance are deliberately activated to capture the attention of state authorities. This approach enables an examination of the interrelations among symbolism, failures in disaster governance, and the collective memory of the community.

The study was conducted in flood-affected areas with the highest frequency of Bulan-Bintang flag displays, namely North Aceh, East Aceh, Lhokseumawe, and Aceh Tamiang. These locations were selected to capture the plurality of perspectives between regions

historically associated with combatant bases as well as more moderate urban areas. The application of strict inclusion criteria ensured that the data collected accurately reflected the collective memory and situational grievances directly experienced by disaster-affected communities.

Data collection employed a multi-method strategy encompassing digital observation, visual documentation, and digital ethnography on social media. This strategy was essential to ensure data triangulation, enabling a holistic understanding of the Bulan-Bintang flag's reactivation across both physical and cyber dimensions. Digital data were collected through scraping posts on TikTok and Instagram that utilised hashtags related to the Aceh floods. These data were further integrated by comparing narratives with visual evidence from the field and public perceptions circulating in digital spaces. This integrated approach allowed the researcher to trace the circulation of symbols from isolated disaster sites to broader national-level discussion.

Data were analysed using Peirce's triadic semiotic model, integrated with thematic analysis supported by NVivo software (Kilstrup, 2015; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). This approach aimed to map the relationships among the sign (the Bulan-Bintang flag), the object (state failure in crisis management), and the interpretant (the meaning of protest), thereby revealing the transformation of the symbol's function. Operationally, the researcher conducted systematic coding to identify dominant themes, including spatial reactivation and collective memory. Research validity was ensured through source triangulation and member checking, confirming that the researcher's interpretations were aligned with the intended meaning of the data. The final outcome of this analysis presents an in-depth ethnographic description of how natural disaster crises can disrupt the dormancy of political symbols and transform them into instruments for demanding accountability from central authorities.

4. Results

4.1 Spatial Reactivation in Crisis Spaces

Spatial reactivation through the hoisting of the Bulan-Bintang flag at flood sites represents the community's effort to assert claims over specific sociopolitical spaces amid the absence of state presence. This action was selected due to the physical spaces affected by the disaster often serve as the most effective visual stage for exposing failures in emergency governance while simultaneously reaffirming locally autonomous identities. Based on in-depth field observations, the pattern of symbol placement exhibited a measured tendency at critical points, ranging from completely incapacitated infrastructure to community centres isolated from logistical assistance. Overall, mapping the locations of flag display indicates that each placement carries particular theoretical significance, intertwined with narratives of public grievance. In order to provide a comprehensive overview of the distribution and meaning behind the selection of these locations, the research data are summarised in Table 1:

Table 1. Typology of Locations, Spatial Patterns, and the Significance of Symbolic Reactivation

Location Category	Spatial Characteriristics	Rationale for Location Selection	Symbolic Message
Critical Infrastructure Damage	Collapsed bridges and heavily flooded inter-district roads	Location that obstruct community mobility	"The state has failed to provide basic protection and connectivity"

Gate	Village entrances or boundarypoints that are isolated	Assertion of territoriality and local autonomy amid the crisis	'We are surviving on our own; where is the state presence?"
Disable Public Facilities	In front of offices and public facilities	Visual critique of bureaucratic institutions' failure to serve the public	'Public services are non-functional; bureaucracy only appears during elections'
Aid Posts	Logistics distribution points	Political critique of the disaster governance's system unpreparedness	"Empty promises of aid"
Livelihood Lands	Flood-damaged rice field areas	Claims or economic looses and failure to protect community assets	'Our identity is threatened: the stage neglects the people's livelihood"

Source: online news

Table 1 illustrates the symbolic reactivation achieved through the placement of the Bulan-Bintang flag, demonstrating that spaces of crisis are treated as politically charged mediums. The selection of locations is not arbitrary; rather, it is directed towards spaces that signify the state's functional failures. Damaged infrastructure, territorial gateways, public facilities, aid posts, and residents' livelihood areas become arenas for articulating symbolic messages, as these spaces directly intersect with communities' experiences of vulnerability. The presence of the symbol at these points reinforces a visual claim regarding the absence of protection, inadequate disaster governance, and the threat to local economic sustainability. Spatially, the symbol operates not merely as an identity marker but as a critical instrument embedded within the landscape of destruction. In this way, spatial reactivation constructs disaster-affected areas as sites of symbolic resistance against a state perceived as failing to fulfil its fundamental responsibilities.

Figure 1. Spatial Reactivation of the Bulan-Bintang Flag in Aceh



Figure 1:
Symbolic Reactivation of the Flag on the Collapsed Bridge



Fgure 2:
Symbolic Reactivation of the Flag at a Gateway



Figure 3:
Symbolic Reactivation on the Flag at a Mosque

Figure 1 illustrates the symbolic reactivation of the Bulan-Bintang flag on a collapsed bridge, emphasising that vital infrastructure is served as a space for articulating political critique. The selection of the bridge is not merely due to its visibility but also its function as a primary connector for social and economic mobility, which is disrupted by the floods. In this context, the presence of the flag transforms the paralysed physical structure into a symbolic statement regarding the state's failure to maintain basic connectivity. Images depicting crowds displaying the flag on the damaged, waterlogged bridge demonstrate how material destruction is intertwined with collective disappointment over the state's minimal response. The bridge ceases to be a neutral artery for transportation, becoming instead a visual stage for resistance. Consequently, spatial reactivation on the collapsed bridge represents the transformation of infrastructural space into a symbol delegitimising the state's protective functions.

Figure 2 depicts the displayed of the Bulan-Bintang flag at a gateway, illustrating that territorial boundaries are reinterpreted as political spaces in times of crisis. Village or regional gateways function not merely as administrative markers but as symbols of spatial sovereignty, symbolically claimed by local communities. When access to these areas is isolated by flooding and aid is perceived as unevenly distributed, gateways are chosen to assert the position of "us" as separate from the centres of power. Visuals of convoys displaying the flag at entry points reveal how transitional spaces become a medium for collective expression. This act operates as a symbolic message of self-reliance, while simultaneously serving as a critique of the state's absence in affected areas. Consequently, spatial reactivation at territorial gateways reflects an effort to assert symbolic autonomy amidst a crisis that diminishes the state's presence.

Figure 3 illustrates the display of the Bulan-Bintang flag at public facilities, particularly mosques, signalling the expansion of sacred spaces into arenas of political expression. Mosques are selected due to their role as centres of social, moral, and communal solidarity in Aceh, especially during disasters. When formal state institutions are perceived as unresponsive, religious spaces function as alternative venues for articulating collective dissatisfaction. Images of crowds displaying the flag in mosque courtyards demonstrate the intertwining of religious symbolism, local identity, and political critique. This practice reinforces the message that the crisis impacts not only

material conditions but also dimensions of value and social justice. Consequently, spatial reactivation at public facilities constructs the mosque as a site of moral legitimacy from which to voice criticism of the state's failure to protect its citizens.

The research findings reveal three primarily patterns in spatial reactivation. First, symbolic reactivation is predominantly directed towards critical infrastructural spaces that have suffered damage or paralysis, as these locations directly represent the state's failure to ensure protective functions and basic connectivity. Second, reactivation frequently occurs in boundary and transitional spaces, which serve as mediums for asserting collective identity and claims of local autonomy amid the state's absence. Third, public spaces possessing high social and moral legitimacy are utilised as arenas for articulating symbolic critique that interweaves political, religious, and humanitarian dimensions. Collectively, these three patterns indicate that spaces of crisis are strategically constructed as fields for symbolic political expression, closely linked to residents' experiences of vulnerability.

4.2 Affective Reactivation in Spaces of Crisis

Affective reactivation through the display of the Bulan-Bintang flag demonstrates that flood crises are percieved not merely as ecological events but also as catalysts for the resurgence of collective emotions rooted in Acehnese historical experiences. This symbolic expression emerges as the state's inadequate disaster respond resonates with longstanding memories of neglect, injustice, and asymmetrical power relations. Based on fieldwork and digital space analyses, patterns of emotional expression reveal a consistent linkage between crisis events, conflict memory, and the symbolic articulation of identity. Collectively, these affective dynamics indicate that the symbol functions not only as a political marker but also as a medium for emotional catharsis and consolidation.

Table 2: Categorisation of Affective Sentiments and Narratives of Symbolic Reactivation

Affective Dimension	**Dominant Narrative**	**Essence of the Narrative**
Betrayal	"Neglected" "Broken promises" "Betrayed"	The sense that peaceful integration has not been reciprocated with equal state protection.
Collective Trauma	"Conflict memory" "Old wounds" "War era"	Linking the injustice of disaster aid with the injustices experienced during military operations.
Solidarity and Dignity	"Self-respect" "Unity" "Identity"	Utilising the symbol to reinforce social cohesion among victims amid the crisis.
Spontaneous Anger	"Protest" "Resist" "Fed up"	Direct expression of frustration over the delayed distribution of aid on the ground.
Political Sarcasm	"welcome" "irony"	Display the flag so they see. Otherwise, they might not bother coming here.
Distrust	"pretence" "exploitation"	Aid is often delayed or reduced due to bureaucracy. Communities place greater trust

		in symbols of struggle than in the promises of the state.
Existential Anxiety	“Threatened” “Loss of livelihood” “Loss of home”	Rice fields destroyed, homes damaged. They have no remaining recourse except their identity as Acehnese.

Source: online media

Table 2 illustrates that affective symbolic reactivation in this context is deeply rooted in a complex and intertwined spectrum of collective emotions. Flood crises and the uncertainty of aid provoke the resurgence of feelings of betrayal, historical trauma, and anxiety over livelihood security. These emotions do not exist in isolation but are produced through repeated experiences of unequal state protection, both during periods of conflict and in disaster management. The data indicate that spontaneous anger, political sarcasm, and distrust of bureaucracy coexist alongside efforts to maintain community dignity and solidarity. In situations of material and livelihood loss, identity symbols function as the most stable affective medium for channeling collective unease. Consequently, affective reactivation demonstrates that the display of the flag is not merely a fleeting emotional expression but a collective mechanism to respond to structural injustice and the existential threats experienced by Acehnese communities.

The affective reactivation observed in the display of the Bulan-Bintang flag reveals deep-seated feelings of disappointment and betrayal among Acehnese residents. These emotions are not solely associated with the delayed distribution of flood aid but are also interpreted as recurring historical experiences, in which Aceh feels once again neglected by the central government. Such disappointment is reinforced by the perception that post-conflict peace commitments have not been fully realized in the form of equal protection. This is exemplified by a comment on a digital platform, stating:

> “We are at peace, we have accepted Indonesia. Yet it turns out that Indonesia does not accept us as an equal part. When we are in need, they do not come” (Comment A)

This statement indicates that disaster crises catalyze the resurgence of unresolved past emotions, with the display of Bulan-Bintang flag serving as a medium to collectively voice feelings of betrayal. Beyond disappointment, the symbol also activates collective trauma rooted in Aceh’s armed conflict experiences. Conflict memory is thereby employed as a comparative framework for interpreting contemporary injustices. The flag now functions as a moral reminder to the state, rather than as an instrument of armed resistance:

> “I remember this flag being raised when we fought the TNI. Now we display it again, but not to fight with weapons. We raise it to remind the government” (Comment B)

Conversely, for some residents, the flag also serves as a symbol of internal solidarity and the affirmation of Acehnese identity. In crisis situations, the symbol functions to reinforce a sense of togetherness and collective dignity, as well as to assert Aceh’s position as a community with a distinct identity and historical experience in its relationship with the state, as reflected in a comment on a digital platform stating:

"We, the people of Aceh, must unite in the face of injustice" (Comment C)

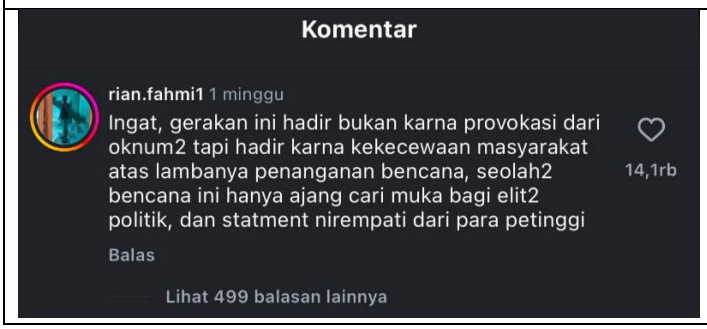
This statement demonstrates that the symbol is understood not only as an instrument of protest but also as a means of emotional and social consolidation amid crisis. The display of the Bulan-Bintang flag serves as a medium to strengthen bonds among fellow victims and to affirm a sense of belonging to the Acehnese community. In this context, collective identity functions as a source of social resilience when state protection is perceived to be weakened. Thus, symbolic reactivation reflects the community's efforts to uphold dignity and sustain solidarity in response to experienced injustice.

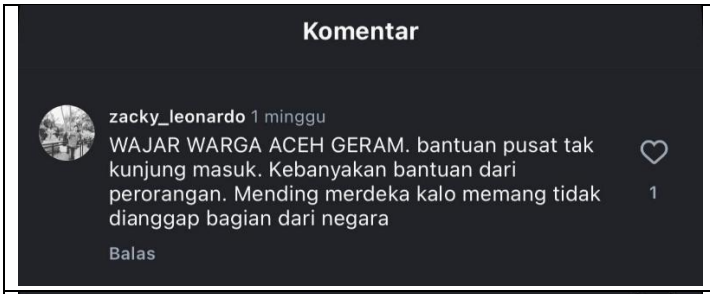
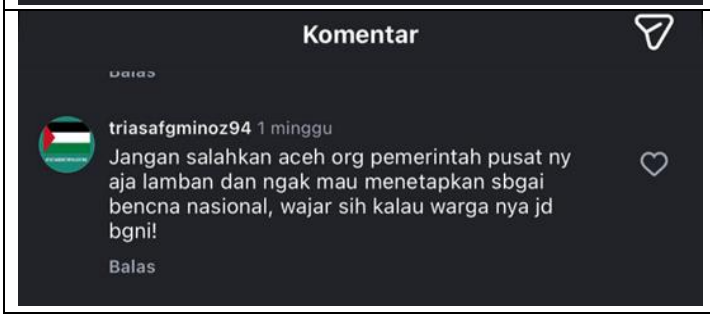
Across the findings, affective reactivation reveals three principal patterns in the emotional dynamics of Acehnese communities. First, the flood crisis acts as a catalyst that reactivates historical feelings of disappointment and betrayal towards the state, whereby failures in disaster response are perceived as a repetition of past neglect. Second, symbolic reactivation demonstrates a strong connection with collective trauma from the conflict period, which is not mobilized through violence but is employed as an affective framework to interpret contemporary injustices. Third, the display of the flag also encompasses an affirmative dimension, reinforcing internal solidarity and affirming Acehnese identity as a source of social resilience amid crisis. Taken together, these patterns indicate that affective reactivation is not merely an emotional response but constitutes a collective mechanism that channels memory, disappointment, and hope are channeled into symbolically charged expressions with political and moral significance

4.3 Digital Reactivation in Crisis Spaces

Digital reactivation constitutes an extended dimension of the symbolic expression of the Bulan-Bintang flag, wherein social media spaces function as a new arena for articulating political meaning and narratives. In the context of the flood crisis, digital platforms serve not only as channels for sharing information but also as mediums to amplify emotions, symbols, and critique that were previously articulated in physical spaces. The narratives circulating on social media reveal how local experiences are translated into broader public discourse, while simultaneously linking historical memory, collective disappointment, and demands for state accountability. This pattern indicates that symbolic reactivation does not end with visual actions on the ground but undergoes a narrative transformation through digital circulation.

Table 3: Public Narratives Reactivation on Social Media

Public Narratives	Coding
	Disappointment

	Resistant
	Anger

Source: online media

Analysis of digital narratives indicates that social media functions as a primary space for the formation and contestation of meaning surrounding the display of the Bulan-Bintang flag. Within this space, the same symbol is interpreted in diverse ways according to users' ideological positions, emotional proximity, and cognitive frameworks. Data tracing reveals a relatively consistent pattern in how the public frames these events. In general, three dominant framings emerge that shape the discourse of symbolic reactivation on social media:

> "This is not separatism; this is protest,"
> "This flag represents the voices of the neglected people,"
> "Aceh needs aid, not accusations."

Digital narratives predominantly position the display of the Bulan-Bintang flag as a legitimate form of public critique directed at the state's failure to respond to the flood crisis in Aceh. This interpretation emerges from residents perceptions that formal channels of political expression are ineffective, rendering social media an alternative space to voice dissatisfaction. In numerous posts, the symbol is presented as a representation of the marginalized victims' voices, rather than as a statement of separatist politics. The argumentation consistently redirects attention from ideological issues to humanitarian demands and the presence of the state. Narrative evidence demonstrates that these symbolic actions aim to remind the government of its responsibilities, rather than challenge sovereignty. Consequently, the protest framing illustrates how digital spaces are utilized to claim moral legitimacy and to redefine the meaning of the symbol as a contextually grounded instrument of social critique.

> "The GAM is rising again,"
> "Separatism is exploiting the disaster,"
> "This is a threat to unity."

Furthermore, a subset of digital posts frames the display of the Bulan-Bintang flag as an indication of a latent threat to national unity. This framing emerges primarily from

nationalist accounts and mainstream media, which interpret the symbol through the lenses of security and conflict history. Various posts associate the appearance of the symbol with collective memories of separatism, thereby marginalizing the humanitarian context underpinning these actions. Such narratives reinforce the assumption that the symbol is never neutral and always carries the potential for threat. Consequently, the threat framing reflects the persistence of state-centric discourse in digital spaces, wherein Acehnese symbolic expression is more readily interpreted as a political risk rather than as a response to structural failure and crisis governance.

> “Aceh has the right to be angry,”
> “Let us help Aceh, not accuse,”
> “This is a call for all of us.”

Some digital narratives construct the display of the Bulan-Bintang flag as an expression of empathy and moral support for Acehnese communities affected by the disaster. Within this framing, the symbol is understood as a reflection of collective suffering that warrants a response of solidarity rather than political suspicion. These posts position residents’ anger and disappointment as legitimate reactions to injustice, while simultaneously calling for national public engagement in supporting Aceh’s recovery. Rather than debating the ideological meaning of the symbol, the narratives direct attention to humanitarian concerns and shared responsibility. Narrative evidence indicates an effort to mitigate polarization by shifting focus from security issues towards social empathy. Consequently, the solidarity framing demonstrates the function of digital spaces as an ethical medium for fostering cross-identitarian support amid crisis

5. Discussion

This study concludes that the reactivation of the Bulan-Bintang flag at flood sites in Aceh constitutes a complex socio-political phenomenon operating simultaneously across spatial, affective, and digital dimensions. The reactivation demonstrates that historical symbols of resistance do not vanish in post-peace context; rather, they persist in a latent state and may be reactivated when the state fails to uphold its fundamental social contract (Johnson, 2023; Galuh Larasati et al., 2023). Theoretically, the flag transforms into a multidimensional assemblage, integrating the materiality of paralysed infrastructure, the surge of collective emotions, trauma-laden historical memory, and the massive amplification afforded by social media technologies (Johansen et al., 2025). In this configuration, communities strategically mobilised moments of crisis as visual and narrative stages to expose perceived patterns of governmental neglect through a symbol imbued with strong moral and historical legitimacy. Accordingly, the findings emphasise that symbolic reactivation functions as an identity-defence mechanism, emerging as a direct response to the state’s failure to provide protective functions in post-conflict regions.

These findings contribute to the literature on political symbolism by demonstrating a contextual transformation in the meaning of the Bulan-Bintang flag, from an instrument of armed resistance to a medium of adaptive, non-violent protest. This shift in meaning is enabled by post-conflict political reconfigurations, civil actor involvement, and amplification through digital spaces, challenging assumptions of linear stability in symbolic interpretation (Solovyov, 2022; Triatmodjo et al., 2023; Wijayati et al., 2021). Theoretically, this phenomenon addresses a gap in disaster governance literature, which often overlooks symbolic dimensions, where the state’s technical-institutional failures catalyst responses grounded in historical memory within socio-political ambiguity

(Ibrahim et al., 2023). It underscores that formal peace through the Helsinki MoU has not entirely eradicated the symbolic residues of conflict, which remain latent and ready to be reactivated during crises. Accordingly, this integration corrects optimistic narratives of Aceh's conflict resolution by revealing that the potential for symbolic contestation persists within fluctuating state–society relations.

The symbolic reactivation during the flood crisis is triggered by systemic failures in disaster governance, intertwined with the absence of responsive formal protest channels for Acehnese communities (Hilhorst et al., 2020). The selection of the Bulan-Bintang flag is grounded in the availability of a symbol within the cultural repertoire that carries a strong collective memory, making it more effective at drawing the authorities' attention than creating a new instrument of protest. Strategically, the flag offers high visual salience for digital documentation and semantic ambiguity, allowing residents to negotiate between expressions of protest and denials of separatist allegations. Its profound emotional content renders the symbol the most stable instrument for affective mobilisation in situations of material loss caused by disaster. Accordingly, the use of the flag constitutes a rational calculation to leverage post-conflict safe spaces to articulate socio-political grievances without immediate risk of military repression.

The symbolic reactivation in Aceh exhibits functional similarities to the use of protest symbols in Hong Kong and Catalonia (Johansen et al., 2025; Mukti et al., 2019), yet it reflects a distinct typology of triggers. Unlike global cases generally prompted by purely political crises, the phenomenon in Aceh demonstrates that non-political crises, such as natural disasters, can act as catalysts for symbolic reactivation to the extent that they expose state failures (Solovyov, 2022). A comparison with the 2004 Tsunami response indicates that the absence of the flag at that time was due to the high risk of military escalation and the dominance of international solidarity, which diverted public attention from political agitation. By contrast, the current flood situation occurs within a post-conflict constellation that permits the use of the flag as a relatively safe and legitimate language of protest for civilians. Thus, this comparison emphasises that symbolic reactivation is highly contingent upon the availability of politically safe spaces and the degree of state failure in crisis management.

The findings of this study recommend a reorientation of disaster governance policies towards greater sensitivity to historical–political contexts in order to safeguard peace stability in post-conflict regions. The government must ensure rapid and transparent disaster responses, as any technical failure risks being interpreted politically as a repetition of systematic marginalisation patterns towards Aceh. Strengthening empathetic public communication is essential to fill narrative vacuums that could trigger the reactivation of protest symbols and to prevent the escalation of tensions between the state and communities. Accordingly, authorities need to adopt non-repressive approaches and enhance inclusive dialogue to restore public trust in the effective implementation of special autonomy. Thus, integrating socio-political perspectives into crisis management is essential to prevent humanitarian disasters from transforming into legitimacy crises that threaten national cohesion permanently.

6. Conclusion

This article concludes that the reactivation of the Crescent–Star flag at flood sites in Aceh constitutes a post-conflict symbolic protest operating simultaneously across spatial, affective, and digital dimensions. This phenomenon does not represent a resurgence of military separatism; rather, it reflects a strategic transformation of the symbol's function, leveraging collective memory to articulate profound critique of disaster governance failures. From a semiotic perspective, the flag—once a representation of

armed resistance—has now transformed into a “flag of disappointment,” functioning as a non-violent language of protest to communicate acute distrust towards state authorities. Through the use of this historical symbol, communities reaffirm their political identity while demanding government accountability in fulfilling its social contract within a still-fragile peace transition (Kilstrup, 2015; Solovyov, 2022). Accordingly, the consolidation of these findings underscores that symbolic reactivation constitutes a legitimate political communication tool for narrating contemporary socio-political marginalisation among Acehnese communities.

This study introduces the concept of crisis-activated symbolic reactivation to explain how non-political crises can trigger the reactivation of dormant political symbols within post-conflict communities (Sapiro, 2023). Theoretically, these findings extend the disaster governance literature by demonstrating that the meanings of symbols are not static, but continuously negotiated and transformed in response to failures in state protection. The practical implications emphasise that disaster management in transitional regions must be historically sensitive to prevent the erosion of trust that could threaten peace stability. Governments are required to complement transparent and inclusive crisis management systems, prioritising spaces for dialogue rather than repressive approaches when addressing public expressions of frustration. Accordingly, strengthening institutional response capacity is essential not only for humanitarian recovery but also as a preventive instrument against the reactivation of conflict residues that could delegitimise central authority.

This study makes an original contribution by proposing a three-path model of symbolic reactivation that simultaneously integrates spatial, affective, and digital dimensions within post-conflict regions. This empirical novelty was achieved through visual and digital ethnographic approaches, demonstrating that symbols no longer function solely in physical spaces but transform into reinforcing virtual assemblages. Conceptually, the model introduces the term situational symbolic transformation to account for the dynamics of historical symbols’ changing meaning without eroding the essence of collective memory when confronted with crises. Future studies are recommended to adopt mixed-methods approaches or Big Data-based sentiment analyses to map the intensity and distribution of symbolic reactivation more broadly across digital spaces. Moreover, comparative research examining similar phenomena in other post-conflict transitional regions would be highly valuable for strengthening the validity of the crisis-activated symbolic reactivation concept within broader universal socio-political context.

Author Contribution Statement

Annisa Dwi Lestari conceptualized the research and drafted the original manuscript; Tabrani ZA performed formal analysis and data validation; Nabila Ulamy Alya conducted the literature review and contributed to visualization; Ermy Azziaty Rozali was responsible for data curation and carried out the review and editing. All authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Disclosure of Interests

We have no conflict of interest to declare

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