

# Social Friction Through Local Community Rejection during the 2023 Rohingya Refugee Surge in Aceh

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## ABSTRACT

After the pandemic, the peak wave of Rohingya arrivals in Indonesia occurred in 2023, reaching 2,288 people compared to the previous year, which numbered in the hundreds. This high number caused increasingly intense social friction between the Rohingya and local communities, culminating in local rejections. This paper addresses the question of what reasons led to the rejection of Rohingya refugees by the local Aceh community in 2023. The purpose of this research is to illustrate the reasons for the local community's rejection along with its geographic distribution, particularly in 2023. This research uses a qualitative approach with data collection from news published in 2023, where the news directly quotes statements from the local community. This paper uses social friction theory, which provides several categorical explanations for the phenomenon. The findings of this study show that the reasons for the rejection fall within both the ideational/non-material and material realms. This study uses a qualitative approach to explain the social reality.

**Keywords:** Aceh, Social Friction, Rejection, Rohingya, Local Community

## INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has historically served as a vital transit hub for asylum seekers and refugees in Southeast Asia, despite the state not being a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. Historically, Indonesia has demonstrated good faith regarding refugee issues, starting from the Indochinese refugees in the 1970s to the various origins of refugees in Indonesia today. Although Indonesia is not a member state of the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Protocol, the Indonesian state constitution, Article 28G of the 1945 Constitution, recognizes the right to asylum for all people without exception and is bound by Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees everyone the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries. Therefore, in general, Indonesia's history with refugee issues has maintained a proper track record.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), currently, there are 12,177 individuals registered as refugees in Indonesia, consisting of 29% children, 69% adults, and 2% elderly spread across the archipelago. Among these vulnerable groups, Rohingya refugees fleeing systemic persecution have frequently arrived by boat in Aceh, Indonesia's westernmost province. Rohingya refugees experiencing persecution in Myanmar as well as in refugee camps in Bangladesh attempt to leave these areas for countries in Southeast Asia. Countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia are destinations sought out by Rohingya refugees. Large waves of Rohingya refugees in the 21st century first arrived in Indonesia in 2009 and have continued to the present day. Following the 2017 arrival wave, in 2023 indicates the most significant arrivals, with more than 2,000 Rohingya coming to Aceh depicted the refugee crisis at that time. Of that total, 73% are women and children. Several disembarkation points for the Rohingya in Aceh Province include Weh Island (Sabang), Pidie, Aceh Besar, Meulaboh, Bireuen, and East Aceh (UNHCR, 2025).

The Indonesian Government issued Presidential Regulation No. 125 of 2016 concerning the handling of refugees. The handling of refugees under this policy encompasses finding, placement, safeguarding, and immigration supervision. Local governments play roles in providing shelter areas, delivering humanitarian aid, and facilitating cross-sector coordination. Local governments, assisted by international organizations such as UNHCR and IOM as well as local NGOs, provide protection and basic assistance. Although governance, responsibility, and structural authority already exist to handle foreign refugees entering Indonesia, societal dynamics indicate that it is not simple. Social friction has emerged, primarily from the local communities reached by these waves of Rohingya refugees. Several previous studies discuss social friction related to Rohingya refugees in Indonesia, such as the potential for conflict and pluralism (Sopamena, 2023), media framing and the dynamics of public opinion (Mamis et al., 2024), and the role of social media in the rejection of the Rohingya ethnic group (Nurfazillah et al., 2025). However, these previous studies have not specifically captured social friction in the form of the rejection of Rohingya refugees from the perspective of local communities, particularly in 2023. Therefore, this paper poses the research question what reasons led to the rejection of Rohingya refugees by the local Aceh community in 2023. This paper uses a qualitative approach to explain this refugee issue with data collected from news published in 2023 that directly quotes statements from the local community.

### Social Friction Theory

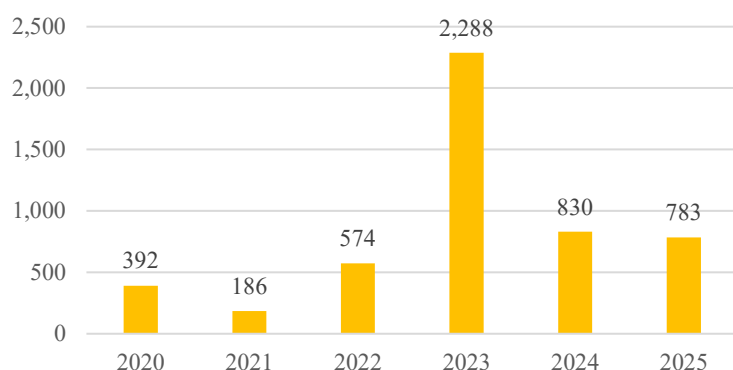
In its early development, social friction theory was developed by Ogburn through the theory of cultural lag. Social friction in Ogburn's theory represents a cultural gap that arises between the rapidly advancing material world (technology, infrastructure, etc.) and the non-material world (values, traditions, etc.), which evolves less quickly than technology (Volti, 2004). At the micro level, social friction is directed at a number of individual or family problems, such as unfulfilled needs within social networks that create tension (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1997). Social friction arises from various causes, for example, state repression of human rights, a form of violence caused by diverse preferences (Persson, 2024).

Contemporary scholars have developed social friction theory to analyze the challenges of the social development process. Wang et al. (2024) distinguish a two-dimensional structure of social friction: explicit and implicit. Implicit refers to the internal roots of social friction, encompassing interpersonal friction, cognitive friction, cultural friction, information friction, and technological friction. Explicit refers to external manifestations, which include behavioral friction, migration friction, economic friction, and institutional friction. Social friction can be condensed into two aspects: the material world and the ideational world. In the case of refugees, the causes of social friction can be categorized ideationally by how refugees arriving in a region are perceived by local residents and how local residents respond. The material aspect also influences how refugees are seen as occupying a territory and creating insecurity, including economic insecurity and other factors (Rawat, 2026).

## DISCUSSION

During the pandemic, even though countries tightened their borders, Rohingya refugees continued to arrive in Indonesia. Sea routes proved difficult to guard, unlike airport entry points. The forced movement of the Rohingya was influenced by insecurity factors occurring both in Myanmar and in the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar (Ashraf, 2021). In the Cox's Bazar refugee camps, conditions such as gang violence, gender-based violence, harassment, poor sanitation, and other issues were reported (Akhter & Kusakabe, 2014; Islam, 2025). Consequently, refugee movements continued despite the pandemic, further catalyzed by human smuggling activities (Khairi & Wahab, 2018). Rohingya arrivals in Indonesia fluctuated, with 392 people in 2020, 186 in 2021, 574 in 2022, 2,288 in 2023, 830 in 2024, and 783 in 2025 (UNHCR, 2025). The peak of Rohingya arrivals occurred in 2023, which accordingly sparked widespread social friction, including rejections by local community.

Chart 1. Rohingya Arrivals in Indonesia (2020–2025)



(UNHCR, 2025)

### Spatial Distribution and Reasons for Rejections

Empirical data from late 2023 illustrates a widespread and escalating pattern of rejection across multiple regencies in Aceh. The friction manifested not merely as passive reluctance, but as active, community-led interventions to prevent disembarkation and force relocations. Key incidents highlighting the scale and locations of these rejections include:

- November 16, 2023 (North Aceh): Local residents in coastal areas, including Ulee Madon, actively guarded the shoreline to prevent a boat carrying over 240 Rohingya refugees from landing. The community effectively pushed the vessel back to sea, citing a lack of temporary shelters and past grievances regarding refugee behavior. Local residents stated:

*"From a humanitarian perspective, we are concerned, but from another perspective, they are causing commotion. We provided shelter to them, but we also cannot accommodate them... do not want to accept the refugees because based on past experience, the Rohingya run away from the shelters. So we are worried that the same incident will happen again"* (Mirza, 2023).

- November 19, 2023 (Bireuen): An estimated 249 refugees who managed to land were explicitly rejected by the local community. Authorities struggled to find alternative placements as local patience wore thin across neighboring districts. The community's reasons for rejection were:

*"Reflecting on past experiences, they gave the impression of poor behavior and actions that were inappropriate and not in accordance with village customs and norms... The refugees who fled did not maintain cleanliness and disregarded Islamic law and local customs among the community"* (Detik, 2023).

- December 2–4, 2023 (Sabang): Following the arrival of 139 refugees in Gampong Ie Meulee, the local community staged immediate protests. Residents dismantled temporary tents and pressured the local government, resulting in the refugees being temporarily sequestered at a local port facility under threat of forced removal by the locals. Several reasons for the rejection included:

*"They are no longer seeking asylum; for example, one boat has already entered. There will be more coming later. That is because it has become comfortable—they are given food, everything is provided. Sometimes they say the food is too little and throw it away. In Sabang, it has been more than 10 days. They defecate in random places, so everyone in Sabang complains... The reason is the downstream impact on future generations—our children and grandchildren. Later, they will be the ones creating trouble, because there is already an example in Malaysia. So they are no longer coming for asylum. A few years ago, yes, that was asylum. But now they are no longer seeking asylum; they are looking for land in other people's countries, especially in Aceh... However, I was*

*surprised yesterday when the Rohingya suddenly arrived and slept on the beach. The next day or right after the incident, UNHCR (the UN refugee agency) was suddenly on site, so what is actually going on?" (Andriansyah, 2023).*

- December 10–11, 2023 (Aceh Besar and Pidie): A group of 135 refugees experienced severe displacement fatigue, facing consecutive rejections from at least five different communities. Attempts by authorities to shelter them in Ladong village, Lamreh, and a Scout Camp in Pidie were thwarted by local protests.

*"When the first wave of Rohingya came here in the past, we accepted them, but their behavior had many side effects and disturbed the community... Many of them escaped and fled from here, (people feared) losing property, getting into conflicts with residents, and all sorts of things" (Tempo, 2023).*

- December 27, 2023 (Banda Aceh): The social friction culminated in aggressive physical mobilization when hundreds of university students stormed the Balee Meuseuraya Aceh (BMA) building. The mob intimidated the 137 sheltered refugees, damaged their belongings, and forcibly loaded them onto trucks, demanding their immediate deportation at the Ministry of Law and Human Rights regional office. This event was the most extreme instance, where students demonstrated and forcibly moved the refugees onto trucks to take them to another location in Banda Aceh. Civil society organizations and UNHCR suspected that the rejection was driven by hate speech and negative online campaigns consumed by the students. Reasons for rejection included:

*"They do many unreasonable things, like often going on hunger strikes and demanding proper accommodations. They should... they just came here uninvited, but it's like they feel this is their country. It feels inappropriate... If these ethnic people cannot be deported from Aceh, then I guarantee students will show up in double the numbers to fight government policy" (BBC, 2023).*

These statements from the community can be categorized through social friction theory, namely material and non-material aspects. For the material aspect of the community rejecting refugees, there have been prior unpleasant interaction experiences between the local community and the refugees. The behavior of the refugees is considered by the local community as not in accordance with expectations, violating norms, running away from shelters, uncleanliness, and posing a threat to property. Social jealousy also occurs where the community sees refugees being given food for free, provided with a place, and other assistance and facilities, while many Indonesian people still also need help. Furthermore, the lack of accommodation space becomes the reason the community rejects refugees being in their area. The non-material aspect includes how refugees and international organizations are perceived. Refugees are perceived by the minds of the community as a threat to norms, security, as well as land. Rohingya refugees are perceived as going to occupy land in Aceh, not merely seeking asylum. The community perceives that the state must be firm in guarding maritime borders by rejecting the arrival of these refugees, an indication of an anti-humanitarian attitude. The local community suspects that the refugees and the international organization UNHCR are working together so that the refugees come continuously. Negative sentiments among university students arise because of the negative news on social media that they consume, thereby causing hateful behavior.

## CONCLUSION

It can be seen from several reasons for rejection from the residents' perspective that past experience with the behavior of the Rohingya was disliked by locals, including violations of norms, failure to respect Islamic law as applied in the Aceh region, refugees escaping from shelters, bad habits, and conflicts with residents. Regarding perceptions, the grounds for rejection included the belief that the Rohingya were no longer seeking asylum but rather the land of the Acehnese, as well as suspicion toward international organizations, particularly UNHCR. The Rohingya refugees were perceived as a potential driver of crime and a local threat to land control, the economy, and social stability. Social jealousy also acted as a driver of local rejection toward the Rohingya.

Technology factors that caused negative sentiment to spread rapidly and manifest in student demonstrations demonstrate that hate speech has an effect on the formation of anti-humanitarian actions. This signals that information technology brings certain dangers to humanitarian issues. Technology and the dissemination of negative information can generate social friction in reality. From the standpoint of social friction theory, this further reinforces technological friction. This differs from cultural lag, where technology no longer creates a cultural gap relative to perception and values, but actively shapes them. Both ideational and material factors are present across the various reasons for local residents' rejection of Rohingya refugees. This provides a picture of a complex reality that cannot be simply dismissed, because social phenomena do not exist within the system of thought "what ought to be." This phenomenon proves that there is a lot of problems that must be fixed.

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