

Men in uniform and in parliament

By Yenni Kwok

The military in Indonesia, as in many Asian countries, often plays an important role in the rise and fall of the key politicians. The leaders themselves frequently emerge from its ranks.

That was the case with Suharto, whose three decades as ruler cemented the position of the Indonesian military.

Since 1998, when Suharto stepped down amid allegations of large-scale corruption and nepotism, the military has remained shadowy yet powerful.

As democracy has been gradually introduced, some of the influence of the officers has receded. Yet the military still retains seats in parliament and has the potential to play an influential part in any change to the political leadership.

The changes of the military began under the presidency of B.J. Habibie, a German-trained aeronautical engineer and Suharto's political protege. More changes came when a Muslim cleric, Abdurrahman Wahid, became Indonesia's first elected president.

The military's seats in parliament have been reduced to around half, and they are expected to give them up entirely by 2009. However, many Indonesians believe reform is too slow.

At the very top, Wahid needed both public and military support.

Will they, will they not?

During the recent showdown over Wahid's leadership, Defense Minister Mahfud M.D. warned that the military could take over if the chaotic political situation in the capital continues.

Other analysts, however, dismiss his warning.

"The military is too demoralized and disoriented that it doesn't know what it will do," says Kusananto Anggoro, military analyst at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

The International Crisis Group, in a paper on Indonesia's military, says:

"It is far too fragmented to act, cohesively; it lacks confidence . . . and most importantly, its leaders know, any attempt to restore its political power would certainly trigger massive demonstrations throughout the country, which could easily turn to riots . . . "

Up to the last minute of Suharto's presidency, the military -- under armed forces chief Gen. Wiranto -- never abandoned the president. Unlike the military in Thailand and the Philippines, they did not intervene to either quash or support the political protesters.

Suharto filled in the military leadership with those loyal to him, but he also fostered rivalries among them.

In the end, the army, the strongest within the military, is divided into two camps: the red-white faction (nationalists) under Gen. Wiranto, and the green (Muslims) faction under the influence of Lt-Gen. Prabowo Subianto, Suharto's son-in-law.

In his 32 years in power, Suharto -- himself a military general -- expanded the military role in both internal security and socio-political affairs.

This dual role is based on the "dwi-fungsi" (dual function) doctrine, adopted in 1966.

Thus, the military played a great role in supporting Suharto's government, crushing dissenting voices and separatist movements, as well as appointing active or retired officers to hold government jobs, from cabinet members to district heads.

Golkar, Suharto's ruling party, was set up by military officers in 1967. Relying largely on intimidation and coercion, it won every election by a wide margin.

Through its territorial command organization, the army wields influence and ensures loyalty of regional governments.

Despite its large role, the military spent only one per cent of the budget for military expenses. Hence thus the military largely finances expenditure through a network of businesses and other funds that extend from the capital to the outer regions.

Habibie's Pandora box

With Suharto's departure, Gen. Wiranto quickly pledged the military

support to President B.J. Habibie's new government.

Habibie liberated the media and freedom of expression and in doing so, exposed the military abuses to scrutiny.

The excesses of the men in uniform in the restive provinces of Aceh, Irian Jaya and East Timor have since been exposed and condemned in public. The military is also under pressure to explain its role in the shooting of Jakartan Muslims in 1984 and a group of farmers in 1989, as well as the kidnapping of activists and others.

Wiranto has apologized for abuses committed by some "individual officers" in Aceh.

Strong condemnation has demoralized the military and made it more defensive. In an effort to disassociate itself from the previous regime, the military has changed its name from ABRI (the Armed Forces of the Republic of Indonesia) to TNI (Indonesian National Military).

Activists and civilian leaders continue to demand that the military abandon its dual-function policy. They want the military back in its barracks.

The politicians, however, are not ready to take such dramatic measures immediately. The military (including the police force) is still represented in the Parliament (both lower house and upper house), but as stipulated by Parliament in January 1999, their seats were reduced from 75 to 38.

They are expected to not to be represented at all by 2009.

Wahid's initial changes

A few more changes took place after Abdurrahman Wahid took presidency in 1999. He finalized the separation of the police force from the military in mid-2000, six months earlier than scheduled.

In his first cabinet line-up, Wahid picked Juwono Sudarsono, an intellectual at a military think-tank, as his defense minister. It was the first time a civilian had held the portfolio since the 1950s.

He also appointed Adm. Widodo Adi Sucipto as the armed forces chief. The appointment of a non-army officer to head the armed forces for the first time was probably based on the belief that a naval officer could not mobilize the army to confront the president.

Gen. Wiranto, seen as too close to Suharto, was the coordinating minister

of political affairs and security. He stayed just a few months in the cabinet, and Wahid dismissed him after a government fact-finding team named him among those responsible for East Timor killings.

In April, Wahid successfully installed an outspoken, reformist general Lt-Gen. Agus Wirahadikusumah, seen as Wiranto's rival, as the head of the elite Kostrad, the Army Strategic Command.

Just four months later Agus was transferred to a non-strategic post in the army headquarters and replaced by Lt-Gen. Ryamizard Ryacudu, son-in-law of former Suharto's vice president Gen. Try Sutrisno.

The switch was interpreted as Wahid losing his grip, but others see it as part of Wahid's bargaining with the conservatives.

Many people fear this could slow down reforms, especially on the controversial issue of dismantling the territorial command and war crimes.

Despite a promising start, Wahid's government faces more challenges ahead to control the military. Rogue elements are believed to be destabilizing Indonesia with mysterious bombings as well as stirring trouble elsewhere.

At the same time, Wahid's government is struggling to earn respect and support from the military. His 26-member cabinet line-up, which include five serving or retired officers, reflects Wahid's wish to for appeasement.

Although military representatives sided with the opposition parties in early 2001 to censure the president over two financial scandals, the military finally avows loyalty to the president. It is not loyalty to Wahid personally, according to military analyst Salim Said.

"They are loyal to the presidential institution but not to Gus Dur," he said, using Wahid's nickname.

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