



The Future of Indonesia's Democracy

Governance Through Security and Lessons from an Authoritarian Past

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Indonesia's post-authoritarian democracy—governing nearly 300 million people, the world's largest Muslim population, and the world's seventeenth-largest economy—has been one of the most consequential political achievements of the post-Cold War era. How secure is it today, and what political future awaits this hinge state at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region?

Since the inauguration of President Prabowo Subianto in October 2024, Indonesia has entered a new phase in its democratic experiment—one that revives the military's institutional power in civilian life. Active-duty and former military men now play important roles in nonmilitary affairs, from cabinet appointments to public welfare programs. A key turning point came in March 2025, when the Indonesian parliament passed Law No. 3 of 2025 on the Indonesian National Armed Forces, thus expanding the military's mandate beyond defense into cybersecurity, border management, counterterrorism, disaster response, and law enforcement.¹

These developments are best understood as a revival of Indonesia's long tradition of *governance through security*: the process by which governments redefine administrative or social problems as security threats, thereby legitimizing the use of extraordinary measures that would otherwise lie outside normal politics.² Taken together, they signal a significant reordering of the relationship between Indonesia's security institutions and its civilian state apparatus with considerable implications for the well-being of its democracy.

Indonesia's current trajectory raises a set of pressing questions. How did this idea of "governance through security" become securely embedded in Indonesia's repertoire

of statecraft? What lessons from the country's authoritarian past can inform today's policy choices? Most important, how can Indonesia and its partners, particularly the United States, work together to preserve democratic accountability while navigating the challenges of renewed military influence?

In Indonesia, governance through security is not just a matter of rhetoric. It reflects how the state actually works. For decades, the state has relied on the armed forces to perform administrative, developmental, and political functions that civilian institutions never fully assumed or failed to deliver effectively. This long-standing pattern of security-inflected governance, in which the state tends to rely on its security institutions not only as guardians of the state but as its principal instruments of governance, helps explain why the military continues to play expansive roles in nonmilitary affairs. Understanding this history is essential for interpreting contemporary shifts in Indonesian civil-military relations.

Indonesia's case reflects a broader global pattern. Across many regions, militaries have reentered civilian politics as states grapple with legitimacy crises, rising geopolitical uncertainty, and, most critically, weak civilian institutions.³ As political scientist S. E. Finer famously observed, military intervention into politics is most likely where the armed forces are highly organized and professionalized while civilian institutions remain less developed, fragmented, or ineffective.⁴ This was the case in Egypt, where the military has acquired enduring influence over governance amid persistently weak civilian institutions.⁵ In the economic sector, a related indicator of military incursion into politics is the expansion of military-linked business interests and patronage networks, thus entrenching security institutions within the fabric of political and economic life, such as in Pakistan and Myanmar.⁶ Recent scholarship suggests that Southeast Asia has not been immune to these patterns of military involvement in economic affairs, and Indonesia is no exception.⁷

Although Indonesia's case exhibits many similarities with these other cases of military intervention in civilian affairs, the country's trajectory remains distinctive. In Indonesia, the emergence of governance through security is neither a product of a coup nor a sudden breakdown of political order, but rather it was forged through gradual institutional normalization. As this brief will show, this pattern was deeply rooted in Indonesia's historical experience and continues to shape its democratic present.

Drawing from Indonesia's experience during the Indonesian National Revolution (1945–49) to Suharto's New Order (1965–98), this brief makes three core claims. First, governance through security in Indonesia has usually emerged less from actual responses to emergencies than from chronic institutional weakness. When civilian agencies falter, political elites fall back on the military as the only coherent organization capable of acting at scale. Second, once security institutions become embedded in nonmilitary affairs, they are exceedingly difficult to dislodge—especially when reforms neglect the parallel task of building civilian institutional capacity. Third, as we shall demonstrate, more sustainable

civil-military relations will depend not on excluding the military from public life but on rebalancing the civilian and military division of labor through three kinds of reforms: strengthening civilian oversight, investing in professional civilian agencies in military-dominated sectors, and aligning external partnerships and internal public narratives with a national security concept that is rooted in the idea of civic resilience.

HISTORICAL LEGACIES OF SECURITY-INFLECTED STATECRAFT

With these policy frameworks to guide us, we now turn to history. Indonesia's past shows how the pattern of governance through security was constructed and normalized and why. Without deliberate institutional redesign, today's pragmatic reliance on the military risks reproduces older patterns of institutional dependency and, ultimately, democratic erosion.

REVOLUTION AND THE BIRTH OF A "PEOPLE'S ARMY," 1945-1950s

The Indonesian National Armed Forces (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, or TNI) hails its origins from the height of the Indonesian National Revolution. During much of this revolutionary period, the bulk of the Republican fighting forces was based on a coalition of *laskars* (militia groups), formerly Japanese-trained militias (Pembela Tanah Air, or PETA), and a minority group of Dutch-trained former officers of the colonial army (Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger, or KNIL). As a result, the newly formed TNI inherited a broad spectrum of political and ideological identities. Throughout much of its early years, Indonesian civil-military relations revolved around the challenge of producing a unified and coherent force out of these diverse groups.

Furthermore, the revolutionary nature of its birth also imbued the military with a political sense—it was a military that prided itself as a "people's army," an army that has fought for and together with the people and that became embossed into its ideological mold. Often during the revolution, borderlines between civil and military authorities were blurred, and field commanders saw themselves administering towns, collecting taxes, or organizing public logistics. The revolution left the TNI with a taste of public governance. The revolutionary government also often relied on the TNI as both its security guarantor and its developmental partner, rather than a purely professional army.

The result was a paradox: While civilian institutions remained embryonic, the military became indispensable to the state's very survival. What began as institutional necessity subsequently evolved into an institutional identity.

LIBERAL AND GUIDED DEMOCRACY ERAS (1950-1965)

During the tumultuous years of the Liberal Democracy era (1950-59), the country briefly experimented with political parties and a parliamentary system. However, during the

same period, the country also experienced chronic uprisings, rebellions, and social insecurity, with a major Islamist rebellion—the Darul Islam—plaguing the countryside of Java, Sumatra, and Sulawesi.⁸ This situation was then exacerbated with a series of revolts by regional army commanders under the PRRI-Permesta banner in 1956.

In responding to these constant security challenges, a seemingly insolvable political impasse in the parliament and a general crisis in the socioeconomic livelihood of the people, President Sukarno saw the need to implement a “new style of government” in order to solve these problems.⁹ On March 14, 1957, Sukarno disbanded his cabinet and declared nationwide martial law in order to push forward his reforms.¹⁰ The new government, dubbed Guided Democracy (Demokrasi Terpimpin) was effectively a government-by-decree that relied much on two main elements of governance, namely the implementation of martial law and an emphasis of mass mobilization.

It was during this period of Guided Democracy that the military emerged as a major player in politics. In 1953, General Abdul Haris Nasution, the country’s foremost military theorist, offered a concept of military organization that was based on his guerrilla experiences during the revolutionary war.¹¹ Dubbed the Total People’s War (Perang Rakyat Semesta), the strategy was based on a territorially organized defensive force supplemented by a disciplined regular armed force.¹² In 1958, the military institutionalized its territorial command (Kodam) structure, in which a wartime network of regional commands became a permanent military administrative system reaching into provinces, districts, and villages.¹³ These developments became the justification for the army’s involvement into politics.¹⁴

During Guided Democracy, this “martial approach” to governance endured because it was never solely imposed by the military.¹⁵ Civilian jurists, technocrats, and politicians actively legitimized it through decrees, legal doctrines, and bureaucratic alignment. Government through security was very much a product of close cooperation between the military and civilians. For instance, in the 1950s, jurists such as Djokosutono and Basarudin Nasution played an important role in justifying these military interventions under the pretext of martial law, while also educating the military’s administrative-judicial corps.¹⁶

In the economic field, the military’s intervention first began through the management of nationalized foreign enterprises, such as the national oil company Pertamina.¹⁷ At the height of Guided Democracy, the military also conducted the state’s mass mobilization program through civil-military cooperation bodies, civil defense initiatives, and conscription programs for youth and civil servants. All these projects were approved by Sukarno, who was busy preparing himself and the country for a major confrontation with the Western powers.¹⁸ Many of the lessons learned by the military in nonmilitary affairs during Guided Democracy—administration through martial law, implementing civic action programs, and managing civilian interest groups—became invaluable later on.

THE NEW ORDER ERA (1965-1998)

When Sukarno's Guided Democracy regime ended abruptly in 1965, it was replaced by a military-authoritarian regime under General Suharto. The regime, dubbed the New Order, formalized the military's social and political role through the doctrine of Dual Function (Dwifungsi) of the Armed Forces, which subsequently legitimized the military's role in nonmilitary affairs—from Parliament members and regional governorships to managers of state-owned enterprises and official historians.¹⁹ The Dwifungsi ultimately became the backbone of Suharto's authoritarian rule.

In many ways, the New Order regime operated through a military-bureaucratic complex legitimized by a de facto emergency, in which civilian institutions became subordinate to military authority. Throughout these episodes, emergency measures had routinely become instruments of ordinary governance. By the 1980s, the TNI had embedded itself in every administrative layer—from village-level territorial commands to cabinet ministries.

Governance through security became synonymous with normal governance, as development projects were administered under a security logic, thus merging stability with modernization. Most famously, the New Order government implemented a nationwide military civic action program, the ABRI Masuk Desa, which involved the peacetime deployment of battalions of soldiers to underdeveloped villages to help with the construction of infrastructure such as bridges, paved roads, and irrigation systems.²⁰

This history reveals a pattern—governance through security in Indonesia did not result from the collapse of civilian rule but rather from its adaptation to military structures. The persistence of this logic explains why even democratic leaders often rely on the TNI for civilian tasks (disaster relief, food logistics, vaccination campaigns). Policymakers must recognize that dis-embedding this historical logic requires a redefinition of what counts as “crisis” and “normal” governance.

THE REFORMASI ERA (1998-2025)

In many ways, the Reformasi (reforms) era that was ushered by the fall of Suharto in 1998 brought many changes, from bureaucratic decentralization to emancipation of civil society through democratization. The Reformasi also aimed to bring about lasting changes to the country's civil-military relations by removing the military from politics, separating the police from the armed forces, dismantling the territorial system, and revamping the military judicial system.

The Reformasi, however, never fully fulfilled its own goals. The territorial command system remains intact, and military justice reform has stalled.²¹ When the country was hit by a series of terror attacks in the early 2000s, efforts to abolish the army's territorial system and reform the military judicial system quickly lost steam. The state found

new roles for the army's old system in military operations other than war (MOOTW) such as in counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.²² Meanwhile, other programs such as the village-level army civic action projects also remained part of the military's repertoire in rural development, albeit on a much smaller scale.

Now, necessity is once again the watchword. The Reformasi-era security sector reform agenda, so the argument goes, left a long-term problem within its ranks—namely bottlenecks and logjams within the officer corps.²³ To solve these organizational problems, the TNI has long floated the idea of assigning its surplus officers to civilian positions in order to solve this problem—latest by former Armed Forces Chief of Staff Hadi Tjahjanto in 2019.²⁴ This organizational problem is also evident in the police.²⁵ The idea was met with strong resistance from civil society activists concerned with the revival of *Dwifungsi*.²⁶ In October 2023, then-President Joko Widodo responded by passing Law No. 20 on Civil Service, which officially allowed members of the military and police to take up nonmanagerial positions in the bureaucracy.

To be sure, there are valid institutional and geopolitical reasons for the military's role in nonmilitary affairs, particularly in the spheres of disaster management, border management, and maritime security. Just as in other countries, Indonesia's disaster management and search and rescue agencies, the Disaster Management Agency (BNPB) and Basarnas, have always relied on support from the military in times of crisis. Indonesia has also long suffered in the sphere of cybersecurity, and collaboration with the security sector is essential in this field.²⁷

Further, a renewed attention to maritime security is of fundamental importance for Indonesia, as the country engages with China's gray-zone tactics in the South China Sea, which lies north of its Natuna Islands.²⁸ Nevertheless, many of these nonmilitary tasks ultimately require highly specialized organizational setup and a solid cadre of professional experts in its field in order to maintain a strong institutional capacity.

GOVERNANCE THROUGH SECURITY UNDER THE PRABOWO ADMINISTRATION

As the Prabowo-Gibran administration took power in October 2024, its strategy has focused on three main characteristics. First is recentralization of power. This fact is most evident in the makeup of the political coalition supporting him in his victory in the 2024 General Elections—a big-tent political alliance that included almost all the major political parties in Indonesia, a continuation of a long-running trend in contemporary Indonesian politics.²⁹ Second is the return of a security-inflected framework of domestic governance through the gradual inclusion of military and security apparatus in the administration of the state. Third is the reassertion of Indonesian foreign policy, as Prabowo-Gibran seeks to bring Indonesia onto the global stage through greater participation in global forums such as BRICS or direct engagements with global issues such as the peace negotiations between Israel and Hamas. Although these characteristics are, in

many ways, intertwined with each other, this brief focuses on the second characteristic, namely the reemergence of a security framework in governance.

At its outset, the militaristic bent of Prabowo-Gibran's new administration is evident even in the media. Back in October 2024, Prabowo inaugurated his cabinet by a "bizarre initiation ritual" in the nation's Military Academy at Magelang, where cabinet ministers donned army fatigues, wore combat boots, and did morning drills.³⁰ Out of the 136 ministers, deputies, and agency heads in the cabinet, at least twenty-four are former or active military and police.³¹ The current administration also expanded the Bela Negara indoctrination program, which first began under Prabowo's tenure as defense minister in 2021, into a full-scale reservist component program.³²

The key turning point arrived on March 20, 2025, when the Indonesian parliament passed sweeping revisions to Law No. 34 of 2004 on the TNI—the legal cornerstone to Indonesia's post-authoritarian civil-military reforms. The revised law incorporated three elements. First was the legalization of MOOTW as one of the core tasks of the TNI, while expanding its mandate in cyber defense and operations for the protection of Indonesian citizens and interests abroad. Second was the expansion of civilian ministries or agencies open for active-duty military personnel, which includes the BNPB, Border Management Agency (BNPP), Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT), and the State Prosecutor's Office (Kejaksaan).³³ Third was the extension of retirement ages for soldiers and officers up to sixty-two years old.³⁴

Civil-rights groups have grumbled, claiming that these revisions held "no urgency," while the lawmaking process itself was flawed because the deliberations had been "conducted without meaningful civic participation."³⁵ Others were even more concerned that these revisions could easily pave the way for the military's return to politics, as had happened during Suharto's New Order regime (1965–98).³⁶ This debate shows how Indonesia's long history of involving the military in nonmilitary affairs remains influential in the nation's sociopolitical life.

To be sure, the Prabowo administration is showing a strong commitment to force modernization under its Perisai Trisula Nusantara strategy, which is a welcomed development in a country that by global standards has long spent little on its defense outlays.³⁷ Many of the improvements were also focused on the strengthening of the nation's air and naval forces. Most prominently, perhaps, is a cluster of new armaments from European manufacturers. These include forty-two Dassault Rafale fighter jets, two Scorpène-class submarines, two Thales di Revel-class multipurpose offshore patrol vessels, Airbus A400M transport and aerial refueling aircrafts, and a variety of antiship missiles and radar systems. Furthermore, the administration has also signed deals to purchase 48 TAI TF Kaan fighter jets from Turkey while also showing interest in acquiring Chengdu J-10B fighter jets, two Houbai-class fast attack crafts, and a set of land-based antiship missiles from China and BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles from India.³⁸ All of this is in addition to the currently ongoing collaboration and negotiations to acquire KF-21 Boramae and F-15EX fighter jets from South Korea and the United States, respectively.³⁹

In addition to this massive defense spending spree, Prabowo is mobilizing the military for domestic affairs. Compared to his predecessor, Prabowo is less shy in overtly mustering the military to support his hallmark projects. This is most evident in the nationwide nutritious meals program (Makan Bergizi Gratis, or MBG) and the Food Estate programs in Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Papua. The agency responsible for the free food program, the National Nutrition Agency, is dominated by retired military officers.⁴⁰ The state agency responsible for distributing and regulating the national supply of foodstuffs, the National Logistics Agency (Bulog), is led by a former active-duty officer, Novi Helmy Prasetya. This trend is reflected in other agencies such as in the Ministry of Transportation, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Hajj Agency.⁴¹

More significantly, Prabowo's reliance on the military in civilian affairs also brought major changes to the TNI's institutional makeup. In supporting the food estate projects, the TNI is establishing a hundred new Territorial Development Battalions (Batayon Teritorial Pembangunan) equipped with companies specializing in agriculture, fisheries, and animal husbandry.⁴² The Nutrition Agency is also training its new cadres—projected to be 32,000 strong—in the Indonesian Defense University (Unhan).⁴³ Meanwhile, on-the-ground operations have been ongoing for some time, as personnel from the army's territorial commands, together with the police, were deployed in overseeing and constructing public kitchens and distribution centers for the MBG.⁴⁴

Meanwhile, together with the police and judiciary, TNI is also involved in a leading role in forestry management through a new task force for forestry management (Satgas PKH).⁴⁵ This task force has been active in seizing palm oil plantations involved in corruption cases, amounting to 9.1 million acres of land to date. Half of these lands were transferred to the new state-owned firm Agrinas Palma Nusantara, thus fueling fears of a broader nationalization drive across the palm oil sector.⁴⁶ In an echo from the past under Guided Democracy, the military is once again taking on economic roles by its involvement in nationalized enterprises.

The military and police's gradual reentry into non-security roles—a tenet once so central to Suharto's New Order regime and silently revived under previous President Joko Widodo—is quickly gaining momentum under Prabowo. If these trends of political centralization and security-inflected governance remain unchecked, it is possible that we are looking at further democratic backsliding in the world's third-largest democracy.

STRUCTURAL DRIVERS OF GOVERNANCE THROUGH SECURITY: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Prabowo's policies do not exist in a vacuum. Several structural drivers underpin the return of governance through security in Indonesia. At least four factors motivate these developments, namely the limited institutional capacity within the civilian apparatus, the incompleteness of the Reformasi agenda, a long-standing historical tendency to securitize crises, and the high level of public trust in the military as an institution.

The first factor is institutional capacity. It is clear that Prabowo saw that the many civilian ministries directly responsible for welfare, food security, and forestry management—such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Ministry of Forestry and the Ministry of Environment—were not sufficiently capable of executing his ambitious policy agenda. As a result, the administration has relied on the military to fill these gaps. This is evident, for instance, in the military’s role in seizing and managing palm oil plantations and forestry lands implicated in corruption cases.⁴⁷ Other ministries, including Agriculture and Social Affairs, as well as the National Logistics Agency, have also seen increased military participation.⁴⁸ This institutional weakness serves as a major “pull factor,” drawing the military deeper into governance.

At the same time, the military—though not necessarily more technically skilled in civilian affairs—remains Indonesia’s most organizationally coherent and geographically widespread institution. Its territorial management system, materiel and logistical reach, and long experience in crisis and disaster response provide the TNI with capabilities that civilian ministries cannot easily replicate. This relative competence—rather than absolute expertise—constitutes a structural “push factor,” encouraging Jakarta’s elites to rely on the military whenever administrative problems or emergencies arise.

The second factor is the incompleteness of the Reformasi agenda. Although Indonesia initiated significant reforms after Suharto’s fall in 1998, security-sector reforms have failed to maintain their momentum. The military’s territorial system—a remnant of the Guided Democracy and New Order eras—remains in place, while military judicial reforms have mostly stalled.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, during the early 2000s, the military establishment also found new relevance for the territorial system as a platform for MOOTW, including counterterrorism and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief.⁵⁰ Persistent logjams and bottlenecks in the officer corps have incentivized military and police leaders to seek civilian postings for the corps’ surplus officers, normalizing their presence in nonmilitary roles.⁵¹

The third factor is Indonesia’s long-standing tradition of securitizing crises. From natural disasters to pandemics, the country has routinely relied on the military and police as first responders and primary coordinators of disaster response. For example, in the governmental task force established during the COVID-19 emergency, there was broad participation by active and retired officers, although scholars have argued that the task force itself was not “militarized.”⁵² Moreover, this fact is also reinforced by the increasingly volatile geopolitical dynamics in Southeast Asia, such as the ongoing civil war in Myanmar, the recent border conflict between Cambodia and Thailand, and the heightened level of confrontation between Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) claimant states against China in the South China Sea.

The fourth factor is Indonesia’s high level of public trust in the military. Public opinion surveys consistently rank the TNI as the country’s most trusted institution—a striking yet commendable outcome for a society emerging from decades of military authoritarian

rule.⁵³ On the one hand, trust provides civilian elites with strong “push” incentives to rely on the military to deliver visible results in governmental affairs such as welfare distribution, disaster response, and border management. On the other hand, when citizens perceive the military as more efficient than their civilian counterparts, democratic competition can encourage, or “pull,” security institutions into governance. Research also points to a modest but growing trend of authoritarian nostalgia, focused largely on the perceived economic stability during the New Order era.⁵⁴

Yet scholars caution that sustained military involvement in civilian affairs risks undermining the military’s hard-earned trust after the Reformasi, which was built on its withdrawal from politics and its commitment to “return to the barracks.”⁵⁵ This risk becomes particularly acute when military officers attached to high-profile civilian posts underperform, as evidenced by the recent communication failures by the head of the Disaster Management Agency in response to the 2025 Sumatra floods.⁵⁶

To be clear, Indonesia is not alone in these developments. These trends echo broader Southeast Asian dynamics—consider Thailand’s institutionalized military role in politics or Myanmar’s government-by-junta, for instance.⁵⁷ Yet unlike these cases, Indonesia’s security-led governance is unraveling under a formal democracy—making it both more subtle and more durable. Here, governance through security thrives not in autocracy or chaos but in the interstices of democratic rule—where law, legitimacy, and institutional capacities intertwine.

THREE POSSIBLE FUTURES?

Considering the structural forces, current evidence, and emerging dynamics discussed above, this article considers three possible trajectories for the future of Indonesian civil-military relations under Prabowo, namely consolidation, escalation, or a rollback of current trends.

CONSOLIDATION

In the first scenario, which is the consolidation of the current status quo, we are looking at a limited but continuous proliferation of active-duty military and police officers in the various civilian ministries and agencies, with exceptions provided by the president/government in areas deemed necessary for the administration’s strategic programs. This means that there will be continued appointment of active and retired military and police officers in non-security roles, such as in the bureaucracy. Meanwhile, there will be an expansion of military and police resources used for Prabowo’s hallmark projects, such as the free food and food estate programs in Kalimantan and Papua.

Shifting the problem into the civilian sphere only masks the officer logjam without addressing the structural deficiencies within the TNI and Polri officer corps. Governing through security solves short-term administrative gaps but creates long-term

vulnerabilities. Civilian agencies like Basarnas, BNPP, and BNPB will grow dependent rather than capable. Indonesia will not get its own FEMA or Coast Guard so long as the military and the police continue to occupy the void. Nor will it build a robust cybersecurity regime if the digital domain is continuously monitored by those primarily trained for kinetic conflict.

Continued military and police domination in the fields of intelligence, cybersecurity and cryptography, disaster management, search and rescue, border patrol, and maritime security will ultimately inhibit the growth of professional institutions in those domains. In the long run, this will not help Indonesia face its immediate security challenges in the cyber, disaster resilience, and maritime domains. Even the military's own effectiveness erodes, as its core mission—external defense—is diluted by attention to domestic affairs. Ultimately, the gradual yet persistent levels of securitization will affect the country's sociopolitical condition, leading to further democratic backsliding. So far, this is the most likely scenario.

In comparative terms, this “soft consolidation” scenario echoes patterns seen in other countries, such as Türkiye under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—not because the military remains politically autonomous, but because security institutions became deeply embedded in governance. In Türkiye, Erdoğan used the failed 2016 coup as a pretext to purge the armed forces and bring them further under executive control.⁵⁸ Elections continue but under conditions where security apparatuses have been absorbed into a centralized, illiberal executive.

ESCALATION

The second scenario sees the escalation of military and police encroachment into nearly all aspects of governance—an acceleration of current trends into outright securitized rule. We will see an increased placement of active-duty and retired military and police officers in civilian positions and a heavy usage of military and police forces as a “reserve army” for state projects not directly related to military or security affairs—such as cultural or public information programs. This solves the military's organizational problem of logjams as the military is allowed to allocate officers to civilian positions and to new units assigned to territorial or developmental tasks.

There will be strong civil society pushback in this scenario as the trauma of the New Order regime remains firmly planted in the minds of Indonesians. Perhaps we will also see an uptick in regional resistance and agrarian conflict in areas heavily impacted by the central government's policies, such as in Papua or possibly in North Sumatra and Aceh.

In this scenario, military professionalism is strongly affected by the enmeshing of civil-military spheres, particularly in the six domains mentioned in the previous scenario. The TNI's and Polri's capacity and effectiveness as a fighting and policing force—and ultimately its capability to provide deterrence against external enemies

or criminals—withers away as security agencies become agents of development. Most important, the democratic system will not survive this accelerated and rapid securitization of the state, thus leading to a higher degree of autocratic rule. This scenario is possible but unlikely.

This more aggressive path of militarization would place Indonesia closer to post-2014 Thailand. Back then, the Thai military not only staged a coup but embedded itself in governance through constitutional engineering, bureaucratic appointments, and civilian repression. Though elections eventually resumed, they were tightly controlled, and democratic oversight never fully recovered. In a more extreme case of this pathway, Indonesia could become Myanmar, where democratic institutions served as a transitional facade for military retrenchment. The armed forces in Myanmar, the Tatmadaw, tolerated civilian rule only so long as it did not threaten its prerogatives—until it seized power outright in 2021. Although Indonesia’s political institutions and civil society are stronger and its public more mobilized, these examples show how quickly a security-led governance may become entrenched once the military’s civilian role is normalized and protected by law.

ROLLBACK

Rollback remains the least likely yet most necessary path. The closest analogies are post-Pinochet Chile and late 1980s South Korea. This third scenario would require judicial checks, political will, legislative courage, and meaningful civic mobilization. It would mean not only repealing laws but also substantially reforming the security institutions, dismantling territorial commands, and building civilian expertise from scratch. It would also require facing the truth: After Reformasi, Indonesia never truly ended its security-first mind-set.

In this scenario, the territorial system is dismantled and replaced with bases with forward-deployed troops in strategic bases. Improvements in civilian oversight would also allow the TNI to benefit from an influx of external expertise in talent management—thus allowing them to address its promotional logjam problems through revised promotional systems, accelerated retirements, and redirection of military officers to other institutions.

The gradual withdrawal of military and police professionals from foreign intelligence, cybersecurity, cryptography, disaster management, search and rescue, border management, and maritime security ultimately provides the opportunity for these institutions to build their own institutional culture and professionalism leading to increased effectiveness. Of course, they would maintain a close relationship with the military and the police as supporting elements.

Additional measures could include stricter regulation of postretirement appointments through mandatory waiting periods and further legislative reforms—such as the law on the military judicial system, police, and others—that would limit military and police roles in nonsecurity affairs. In this scenario, the government would be reoriented away from

security-sector dominance and Indonesia could begin to restore its democratic principles that have eroded in recent years.

A democratic rollback of military and police influence—however remote—would require a path more akin to Chile in the 1990s or South Korea in the 1980s, where sustained public mobilization, elite negotiation, and international pressure converged to restore civilian supremacy. In both cases, rollback was not organic—it was engineered through plebiscites, constitutional amendments, civilian institution building, and the slow erosion of securitized governance. If Indonesia is to pursue this path, it must first reckon with its unfinished Reformasi and confront the quiet normalization of security-first governance.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Politically, the Prabowo administration retains abundant incentives to recalibrate its security-inflected governance framework rather than deepen it. Overreliance on the military risks eroding its professionalism, weakening Indonesia’s defense posture, and constraining Prabowo’s own foreign-policy ambitions as a statesman seeking a more global role for Indonesia. Moreover, a failure to strengthen civilian agencies may leave his administration vulnerable to bureaucratic bottlenecks and further public backlash should the military prove unable to competently sustain expanded governance responsibilities.

1 INSTITUTIONALIZE CIVILIAN OVERSIGHT

The Indonesian government should civilianize the Ministry of Defense as a genuinely civilian-led executive agency. This could take place through expanding the space for civilians with defense and security expertise within the ministry. Strengthening civilian presence and leadership in the defense establishment would also facilitate greater collaboration between the executive and legislative branches on the operational scope of military operations other than war, thereby preventing mission creep or public relations crises.

Furthermore, any active-duty or retired military appointees to nonmilitary positions should require parliamentary confirmation, including to hallmark national-level programs such as the Food Estate, MBG, or support for law enforcement in forestry management under Satgas PKH. Ultimately, the Indonesian government should initiate legal reforms, particularly on the issue of emergency law, in order to prevent legal confusion and to ensure that any temporary extraordinary measures adopted by the security forces does not evolve into permanent governance such as during the Guided Democracy and New Order eras.

2 STRENGTHEN CIVILIAN EXPERTISE AND BUREAUCRATIC COMPETENCE

After civilian oversight, the state must invest in capacity building in the civil service, particularly in the middle and entry levels, in fields that are currently dominated by military or the police services, such as disaster response, search and rescue, maritime security, border security, and cybersecurity agencies.

These agencies should develop their own specialized cadres, operational frameworks, and institutional cultures that are independent of the security and defense establishment, rather than continually depending on the supply of manpower from the military and the police forces. Certainly, interagency collaboration with the security sector should be maintained, particularly through a common operational framework, joint exercises, and professional education.

A useful model of civilian-military collaboration can be found in Japan's and the United States' approaches to disaster response and humanitarian assistance. Japan, for instance, routinely relies on its Self-Defense Forces to provide manpower and materiel during natural disasters, yet it simultaneously maintains a robust, civilian-led system of professional disaster management institutions from the national level to the local level.⁵⁹ A similar arrangement exists in the United States, where the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) serves as the primary coordinator for disaster response. Another important area of civil-military cooperation is noncombatant evacuation operations (NEO), which is becoming increasingly relevant for Indonesia given the possibility of an evacuation contingency amid rising geopolitical uncertainties, particularly over Taiwan.⁶⁰ In both Japan and the United States, disaster relief and evacuation operations are clearly led by civilian agencies staffed by professionals trained in emergency management, rather than by military personnel seconded as first responders.

A move in this direction could be done through collaboration between existing institutions in Indonesia—such as the National Resilience Institute (Lemhannas) and the Indonesian Defense University—and civilian universities such as the University of Indonesia, Bandung Institute of Technology, and Gadjah Mada University. This will eventually pave the way for professionalism and institutional culture in those respective agencies.

3 ALIGN INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS WITH GOVERNANCE GOALS

International security cooperation remains essential for Indonesia. High-level frameworks such as the US-Indonesia Ministerial Strategic Dialogue and US-Indonesia Senior Officials' 2+2 Foreign Policy and Defense Dialogue in 2023 should be continued in order to ensure that defense collaboration is embedded within broader diplomatic and governance priorities.⁶¹

Joint military exercises and operational forums with Western partners such as the United States, Japan, and Australia should be continued. Established multilateral platforms, such as the Super Garuda Shield series of annual military exercises, should be further leveraged not only to enhance joint operational readiness but also to promote norms of democratic transparency, human rights, and mutually beneficial civil-military cooperation.⁶² These exercises are increasingly important as Indonesia modernizes its armed forces, acquiring a diverse array of weapons systems that will require sustained attention to interoperability and operational compatibility.⁶³

In the fields of disaster security, cybersecurity, maritime security, and counterterrorism, there should be clear entry points for civilian-centered engagement. Established maritime security cooperation programs between Indonesia and the United States, for example, have focused on internal infrastructural capacity building such as the US-funded maritime security training center in Batam for the Maritime Security Agency.⁶⁴ This should be expanded into a trilateral coordination with allies in the region, such as the Japan Coast Guard, which has been long involved in training and provision of new ships through its Official Security Assistance scheme.⁶⁵

These initiatives should be integrated in an institutional setting that provides a platform for meaningful civil-military collaboration to further build cross-sectoral capacity and foster better understanding between the two spheres. One example is the US Indo-Pacific Command's Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance (CFE-DM) in Hawaii.⁶⁶ Another is Australia's Civil-Military Centre in Canberra.⁶⁷ Both examples not only provide a platform for civil-military training and joint capacity building but also foster collaboration with willing partners in strategic sectors such as academia and industry.

4 REFRAME NATIONAL SECURITY AS CIVIC RESILIENCE

Promote the ideal of *pertahanan rakyat semesta* (total people's defense) as civic resilience rather than purely militarized mobilization. Disaster mitigation, food security, border security, cybersecurity, public health preparedness, and civic education should be redefined as integral elements of a comprehensive plan of civic resilience, rather than simply an extension of defense and security institutions.

One example here would be Singapore's approach to its "Total Defence" strategy, which has successfully implemented a whole-of-society defense strategy through a blend of social resilience and industrial and technological aspects of defense capabilities.⁶⁸ Another example is Sweden with its similar framework of "societal security."⁶⁹ Again, one way of promoting this strategy is to further engage and incorporate more civilian leadership and personnel within the institutions involved in the security sector, which would subsequently reaffirm to the public that the promotion of civic resilience is not synonymous with governance through security.

CONCLUSION

Indonesia's tradition of governance through security is not merely a symptom of democratic failure but a reemergence of a long-standing historical pattern. From the revolution to the New Order and now under Prabowo, the state has repeatedly turned to the military to solve problems of governance, legitimacy, and capacity. Each time, the justification was pragmatic; each time, the outcome was institutional dependency.

Therefore, the challenge for Indonesia’s democracy is not to eliminate the military from public life but to redefine the meanings and boundaries of its service. Civilian institutions must be rebuilt not as ideological counterweights but as competent partners capable of managing complex national problems. This solution is at the core of any sustainable security-sector reform: a state that is strong enough to direct its armed forces, restrained enough to prevent their overreach, yet trusting enough to rely on them in times of need.

As Indonesia seeks a greater role on the world stage—from the Indo-Pacific to the Global South—it must also demonstrate that its democracy can reconcile security with accountability, and efficiency with legitimacy. Here, history offers a clear warning: When necessity substitutes for institutional design, the dominance of security-inflected governance becomes inevitable. The true test for Indonesia’s democracy is not whether the military remains committed to democracy but whether its civilians can govern and solve crises without constantly summoning it. The task for Indonesia’s policymakers is to ensure that this time, history does not repeat itself.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

	Full Name	English Translation / Description
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations	Regional intergovernmental organization
Bakamla	Badan Keamanan Laut	Indonesian Maritime Security Agency
Basarnas	Badan Nasional Pencarian dan Pertolongan (SAR)	Indonesian National Search and Rescue Agency
BNPB	Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana	Indonesian National Disaster Management Agency
BNPP	Badan Nasional Pengelola Perbatasan	National Border Management Agency
BNPT	Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme	National Counterterrorism Agency
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa	Emerging economies bloc, now comprising ten countries
Bulog	Badan Urusan Logistik	Indonesian National Logistics Agency
CFE-DM	Center for Excellence in Disaster Management and Humanitarian Assistance	US Indo-Pacific Command institution
Dwifungsi	Dwifungsi	Dual Function doctrine of the Indonesian National Armed Forces

ITB	Institut Teknologi Bandung	Bandung Institute of Technology
KNIL	Koninklijk Nederlands-Indisch Leger	Royal Netherlands East Indies Army
Kodam	Komando Daerah Militer	Regional Military Command of the Indonesian Army
Lemhannas	Lembaga Ketahanan Nasional	National Resilience Institute of Indonesia
MBG	Makan Bergizi Gratis	Free nutritious meals program
MOOTW	Military operations other than war	Noncombat military operations
NEO	Noncombatant evacuation operations	Civilian evacuation missions by the military
PETA	Pembela Tanah Air	Defenders of the Homeland, Japanese-trained militia
Polri	Kepolisian Negara Republik Indonesia	Indonesian National Police
PRRI	Pemerintah Revolusioner Republik Indonesia	Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia
Satgas PKH	Satuan Tugas Penertiban Kawasan Hutan	Forestry Management Task Force
TNI	Tentara Nasional Indonesia	Indonesian National Armed Forces
UGM	Universitas Gadjah Mada	Gadjah Mada University
UI	Universitas Indonesia	University of Indonesia
Unhan	Universitas Pertahanan	Indonesian Defense University

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