

The Transition of Civil-Military Relations in Indonesia and Its Implication for Myanmar

Indonesia's struggle toward civilian political control sheds light on the post-coup future of Myanmar

By Liping Xu

Myanmar is not unique in its struggle with civil-military relations, democratization, and elite political competition in post-colonial societies. A regional neighbor, Indonesia, with its long history of military control, has reached a point where military attempts at retaking civilian power are essentially out of the question. The similarities in the two countries' histories, political processes, and attempts at reform call for comparative inspection.

In this policy paper, Liping Xu, a forefront Chinese expert on Indonesia and Southeast Asia, provides key insights on the applicability of Indonesia's experience navigating the complex dynamics of civil-military reform to Myanmar's current political dilemmas. He puts forth four key recommendations learned from the Indonesian model to Myanmar: cultivate reform from within, pursue incremental changes, address ethnic separatism, and maintain productive openness to the military throughout the reform process.

Due to its importance in assisting the state to achieve independence and maintain unity, the military has become an unneglectable political force in the state-building process of modern Southeast Asian countries. Compared to other countries, the military plays a more crucial role in the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, and Indonesia. All of these countries have witnessed military coups or military rule at some point in their histories.

The Philippines went through its democratic transition after Ferdinand Marcos stepped down in 1986. However, the military continued to confront the government and attempt coups. Though the Philippines has never slid back into a military regime, its politics continue to be heavily influenced by the military. In Thailand, the Royal Thai Army Forces, led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, launched a successful coup d'état in 2014. While Prayuth was re-elected as Prime Minister of Thailand by the National Assembly in 2019 and formally resigned from his military positions, these efforts failed to legitimize his rule or offset the fact that he was brought to power through an extralegal coup. Thus, pro-democracy Thai protesters have continued to rally against the prime minister. On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military seized power after detaining State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD).

In comparison, Indonesia has achieved greater success in military professionalism since Suharto stepped down in 1998. The Indonesian military shifted from performing the *dwifungsi* (dual functions), which enabled military involvement in political and social affairs, towards the sole function of protecting the country. Although soldiers were allowed to participate in politics after retirement from their military careers, which may serve as a channel of military influence in domestic politics, Indonesia has taken the regional lead in the professionalization of the military. This paper intends to delineate the transition of civil-military relations in Indonesia and analyze its implications on the reshaping of civil-military relations in Myanmar.

Civil-Military Relations in Indonesia before *Reformasi*

Civil-military relations vary across different historical periods. Indonesian civil-military relations differed greatly between the pre- and post-democratic reform eras. Before democratization, the military gradually rose to the center of political power. After the democratic reform, it began to withdraw from its position in politics and return to the barracks.

Entering the Center of Political Power

After Indonesia declared independence in 1945, it successively established presidential and parliamentary systems, both of which were modern and democratic. However, the diversity and complexity of Indonesian society led to power decentralization. In the early days after independence, political situations at both the central and sub-national levels proved to be turbulent with local rebellions frequently occurring. Sukarno, the founding father of independent Indonesia, relied on the military to quell these rebellions and enforce centralized authority over the country.

On the one hand, the military strived to exert influence on the decision-making by the president and parliament. For instance, in 1952, as a response to the Provisional People's Representative Council's request to dismiss Abdul Haris Nasution from his position as Army Chief of Staff and to restructure the Ministry of Defense, military officers instigated civilian demonstrations to confront the parliament. The army even positioned several tanks at the presidential palace, demanding the dissolution of the Provisional People's Representative Council. In 1955, the army again boycotted the government's policies, causing the downfall of the First Ali Sastroamidjojo Cabinet. On the other hand, when cracking down on local separatist movements, regional military commanders initiated several coups against local governments. The declaration of martial law in 1957 further legalized the military's intervention in local political life. By 1959 when "Guided Democracy" started to be implemented, the army, alongside Sukarno, had already established themselves as a major force in Indonesia's political scene, forming a "Sukarno-army" axis.¹ The military occupied one third of the ministerial seats in the Cabinet; many high-ranking officials, members of parliament, and regional representatives had a military background.

Performing the *Dwifungsi*

The rise of the military as a political force during the Sukarno era created the conditions for it to seize power later on. The intensification of the schism within the army and failure of Sukarno's "Nasakom" governing concept provided the window of opportunity for Suharto's military coup. In 1965, Suharto launched a military coup to overthrow Sukarno's rule and began the era of the "New Order," a term coined by Suharto to characterize his regime in contrast with that of Sukarno.

Suharto's rule relied heavily on militarized dictatorship, with the military widely involved in all aspects of state politics and social administration. In order to legitimize military participation in politics, Suharto endowed the military with *dwifungsi* (dual functions): the military was not only an armed force responsible for defending the country and maintaining domestic stability

but also a key social and political force involved in managing national affairs.ⁱⁱ The 1982 National Defense Law legalized the *dwifungsi* of the Indonesian Armed Forces. It stipulated that military personnel could serve as government officials. On this basis, most of the important positions in Suharto's Cabinet were held by military officers. Among the 500 members of the People's Representative Council (DPR), 75 were military representatives. For example, the Golkar Party (Party of Functional Groups), which consisted both of military and civilian officials, was under the tight control of Suharto and dominated the parliament. Administrative positions throughout provinces, cities, counties, townships, and villages were mostly held by military officers. These measures ensured the realization of the central government's will and its implementation in various regions.

Participating in Economic Activities

The military played a key role in domestic politics and state management, participated extensively in economic activities, and established a military-owned business network. As early as 1957, when Sukarno was in power, the army established the state oil corporation, Pertamina, with the assistance of capital from a Japanese business group. Taxes paid to the government in 1967 accounted for 15% of domestic revenue, increasing to 38% between 1972 and 1973. In 1975, the state oil corporation expanded its investment to petrochemicals, fertilizers, and steel, but it fell into a debt crisis due to its large investments. Even though it was eventually taken over by civilian officials, the oil company had already provided a significant amount of funds for the army. In 1966, the army-controlled BULOG (the Indonesian National Logistics Board concerned with trading in essential commodities) obtained economic power through its purchasing of rice for the army and civil servants and other speculative activities. In addition, various foundations were set up by the army on the grounds of improving the welfare and living conditions of the troops. Military officers became involved in business activities in a wide range of fields like real estate, insurance, industry, labor, aviation, banking, finance, and forest development. In some of the fields, the military even gained a monopoly.ⁱⁱⁱ The independent economic benefits obtained from these business activities enabled military groups to expand their influence in state politics and administration.

Civil-Military Relations in Indonesia after the 1998 Democratic Reforms

After the fall of Suharto in 1998, Indonesia entered an era of modernization and democratic reform. One of the key components was the transition of the military from performing

dwifungsi to professionalization. After the transition, the military was barred from directly participating in politics. However, due to the military's deep-rooted political and economic influence, military officials could still influence the government by retiring from the military and then entering politics.

Professionalization of the Military

As an important part of “top-down” democratic reform, the professionalization of the Indonesian military was led by pro-reform officers within the military. Its main purpose was to abolish the *dwifungsi* of the military during the Suharto era through measures such as the separation of the police from the armed forces, severance of ties to the Golkar Party, and removal of military officers from legislative and administrative positions.^{iv} Reformists advocated for an incremental process. In August 1998, General Wiranto made a formal announcement to reduce military representation in parliament to 38 seats, cease support of the Golkar Party, and separate the police and armed forces. In November, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (a pro-reform General and the first “Chief of Staff for Territorial Affairs”) urged the end of military officers holding nonmilitary government positions and the abolition of sociopolitical departments in local military headquarters.

After Wahid became president, he promoted military reform more actively. He appointed Juwono Sudarsono as Indonesia's first civilian Minister of Defense, reduced the number of military ministers in the Cabinet, removed General Wiranto from his position as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and nominated the non-army officer Admiral Widodo to replace Wiranto. Through denying the military's “Dual Functions,” the Wahid presidency intended to weaken the military's influence in politics.^v Moreover, Wahid facilitated that the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) pass the No. 6 and No. 7 resolutions to separate the armed forces from the police and define their roles. Under these resolutions, the police would facilitate internal security while the military would organize external defense. On March 2, 2000, it was announced that the number of police officers would be increased from 200,000 to 600,000. In January 2001, the management of the police was transferred from the Ministry of Defense to the Ministry of Political and Security Affairs.^{vi} However, the radical reform Wahid undertook on the military caused resentment among the latter, contributing to Wahid's eventual impeachment.

While the military was given greater autonomy during Megawati's presidency, progress towards military professionalization persisted. In August 2002, the fourth amendment of the constitution abolished the military and police seats in parliament. In 2002 and 2004, the Law on National Defense and the Law on Indonesian Armed Forces were passed, further

consolidating the legal foundation for military professionalization. These two acts of legislation strengthened the parliament's power to supervise military budgets and activities, increased civilian involvement in military policymaking, and required the Indonesian government to take over all military businesses.

In 2004, veteran Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono became the first popularly elected president in Indonesian history. He was a pre-reform official in the army and played a crucial role in promoting military reform. Under his presidency, military reform focused on placing the military under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defense and liquidating the military's business activities from the previous era. On the one hand, through the amendments to the Law on National Defense and Law on the Indonesian Armed Forces, it was stipulated that the national armed forces play "supportive roles" in only four areas: civil affairs, safeguarding human rights, UN peacekeeping operations, and assisting the police in maintaining security and public order. It also made clear the principle of "civilian supremacy," which put the military under the control of the Ministry of Defense and allowed the military to only implement the government's defense policy. On the other hand, measures such as establishing the five "regional defense headquarters" and conducting joint operations among all types of armed forces weakened the army's dominating role in the military and reduced the political autonomy of local troops. In 2009, Yudhoyono signed a presidential decree requiring the government to take over all commercial properties directly or indirectly controlled by the military. The decree also ensured the smooth operation of the military by increasing the defense budget. However, the decree was never fully implemented.

Civil-Military Relations after the Reforms

After almost a decade of professionalization efforts, the military has almost completely withdrawn formally from politics. However, the military still exerts influence on Indonesian policymaking. After all, the military has played a determinant role in national sociopolitical policymaking for the past 40 years. Even with these multiple reform efforts, the military retains some level of autonomy and continues to influence Indonesian political life.

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On the one hand, military support is crucial for the president to stay in power and implement policies smoothly. One of the main reasons why Wahid was impeached was that he lost military support due to his radical approach to military reform.^{vii} Megawati successfully replaced Wahid and became president as a result of military support. In return, she reciprocated with the offer

of key cabinet positions to some of the military officers. Yudhoyono was himself a military veteran. Before he served as Coordinating Minister of Political and Security Affairs in Megawati's cabinet, Yudhoyono was already a four-star general in the army. After the 2002 Bali bombing, he oversaw the hunt for and arrest of the terrorists and gained a strong reputation among the Indonesian public. This event contributed to his victory in the 2004 presidential election. Former high-ranking military officers such as Prabowo Subianto and General Hartono started their own political parties in an attempt to obtain power through democratic elections. Even Gatot Nurmantyo, who served as the Commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces after the country entered a period of stable democracy, was once interested in running for president.^{viii}

On the other hand, Indonesia's military reform legalized the military elites' participation in politics after their retirement. Military personnel continued to participate in domestic security affairs through their involvement in counterterrorism, narcotics interdiction, anti-smuggling, and other fields. This involvement gave rise to "grey areas," where the role of the military and the police overlapped.^{ix} Additionally, many local military businesses and institutions were not fully transferred to the state, which continued to provide financial support that allowed the military to retain autonomy from civilian leaders.^x

When "civilian president" Joko Widodo (Jokowi) took office, a key issue was the battle between the police and the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK). The military, seeing an opportunity to portray itself as honest and loyal to the president, formed a reliable alliance with Jokowi and helped him mediate the conflict between the police and the KPK.^{xi} Afterward, Jokowi gradually increased the proportion of seats in the cabinet held by retired military officers, some of which were taken by the military officers who lacked the necessary expertise. For instance, Minister of Health Terawan Agus Putranto, a retired general, was questioned by the Indonesian Medical Association (IDI) regarding his expertise in public health. The IDI asked Jokowi not to appoint Terawan as health minister.^{xii} Retired military officers also frequently participated in local political affairs. The military officers, through either appointment or election after retirement, remained as a political force that cannot be ignored.

Implications for Myanmar

Similar to Indonesia, Myanmar was under civilian rule when it first became independent in January 1948. After a decade, the military seized power and began a long period of military dictatorship. Post-independence Myanmar witnessed two military coups, one in 1962 and the other in 1988. The military was in power for as long as 56 years and experienced five military

regimes, including the “caretaker” government led by General Ne Win (October 1958 to February 1960), as well as the military regimes led by Ne Win (March 1962 to September 1988), by General Saw Maung (September 1988 to April 1992), by General Than Shwe (April 1992 to March 2011), and by General U Thein Sein (March 2011 to March 2016). During this period, Myanmar made some attempts at democratization, including holding elections in 1990 and 2010. The 1990 election was won by the National League for Democracy (NLD), but the military junta refused to recognize the result. In 2010, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won a decisive victory in the general election. The Thein Sein government replaced the military junta and began to substantially promote democratization in Myanmar, including increasing social freedom, promoting ethnic reconciliation, and expanding the degree of opening towards the outside world. However, the main cabinet members consisted of retired military officers. Thein Sein’s government was considered to be the continuation of military rule, and its legitimacy was not widely acknowledged by the public.

In the 2015 general election, the NLD won. This time, the military accepted the election result and transferred power to the NLD. However, the NLD undermined the fundamental interests of the military by attempting to make constitutional amendments and transform Myanmar from “civil-military dual governance” to complete “civilian rule.” When the NLD gained a sweeping victory in the 2020 general election, the military disputed the results, claiming the result was fraudulent. On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar armed forces detained State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, President Win Myint, and other members of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Assembly of the Union), proclaiming a year-long state of emergency. State power was transferred to Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Min Aung Hlaing. Myint Swe, the military-appointed Vice President since 2016, was declared acting president. This move was considered a coup d’état by the United States and other Western countries.

Thus far, the outlook for the Myanmar political situation remains uncertain and grim. Protests against the military’s takeover of power have erupted throughout the country.

The military has used force to counter popular resistance, causing thousands of casualties. The former NLD members in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw ousted in the coup d’état set up the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and announced the National Unity Government (NUG) on April 16. They claimed the NUG is the legitimate government of Myanmar in direct confrontation with the military junta.

The junta’s leader, Min Aung Hlaing, attended a special summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Jakarta to discuss with other ASEAN leaders Myanmar’s political situation. Consensus was reached on issues including halting violence, conducting constructive

dialogues with all parties in Myanmar, appointing an envoy to ASEAN to facilitate dialogue, opening the country to humanitarian aid, and allowing the envoy to visit Myanmar. However, Myanmar's military later stated that they would not consider the ASEAN proposal until the country's "stabilization." The NUG instead stated that it would not open dialogue with the military junta unless the latter releases all political prisoners. Both sides refused to compromise and continue hardline stances toward each other.

Based on the transition and reform of the civil-military relations in Indonesia, several suggestions can be made for the adjustment of Myanmar's civil-military relations.

1. Cultivation of Reformists within the Military is Needed to Promote Reform

Indonesia's democratic reform since 1998 was largely a "top-down" initiative, with military reform being fostered from within. On the eve of Suharto's downfall, Wiranto, then-Minister of Defense and Security and Commander of the Armed Forces of Indonesia, openly opposed Suharto's order to suppress the student movement. Although the military reform Wiranto promoted did not fundamentally undermine the military's interests, his break with Suharto's military dictatorship played a crucial role in Indonesia's democratic transition and laid the foundation for subsequent military reform. Afterward, military professionalization formally embarked under the full support of military reformists, including Yudhoyono. The military reformists were able to implement various reform policies, which consequently depoliticized the military.

In Myanmar, liberal military generals such as Than Shwe and Thein Sein attempted top-down democratization, with Thein Sein transferring power to the NLD after his loss in the 2015 general election. Nevertheless, the reform they promoted did not fundamentally undermine the military's influence. According to the 2008 Constitution drafted by the military, 25% of seats in the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw are reserved for military officers, giving the military a veto over any proposed constitutional amendment; the military has the autonomy to handle military affairs; the Ministries of Defence, Home Affairs, and Border Affairs are headed by active-duty military officers; the military officers hold up to six seats (out of 11) in the president-led National Defence and Security Committee; and in case a major national crisis takes place, the commander-in-chief can take over and exercise national legislative, administrative, and judicial powers. Thus, the so-called military reform provided legitimacy for the military's wide participation in politics under the pressure of public opinion at home and abroad. Moreover, the military was quite cohesive internally. Even when Thura Shwe Mann, the former Joint Chief of Staff of the Armed Services and Chairman of the USDP, joined the NLD camp, there

was no strong force formed to divide the military and undermine its political ambition. In order to minimize resistance and achieve success in reform, it is necessary to cultivate the awareness of reform among the military elites and promote reform from within.

2. Reform Should be Incremental

The military professionalization in Indonesia has been an incremental process. From Suharto's downfall to Yudhoyono's ten-year rule, military reform has experienced gradual evolution for more than a decade. While the military has not fully professionalized, as it still retains connections with regional organizations and businesses, it already accepts the concept of military professionalism and has no intention to restore military dictatorship through coups. One good example is the case of Prabowo, Suharto's son-in-law. As a military officer, he ran in presidential elections twice and contested both results, which sparked mass protests. Eventually, Prabowo's rejection of election results was settled through the Constitutional Court and did not trigger large-scale riots or political struggles between the military and the democratically elected government. This shows that Indonesia's military professionalization reform has produced important results.

After the NLD came to power, it attempted to weaken the military's influence in the political arena. For example, in 2016, 13 parties, including the USDP and the National Unity Party, made a joint declaration requiring National Defence and Security Council meetings. Their request was strongly opposed by the NLD. Moreover, the NLD pushed for the revision of the 2008 Constitution, which was designed to protect military interests. Admittedly, Aung San Suu Kyi, the de-facto NLD leader, expressed a willingness to cooperate with the military before and after the 2015 general election, which led to the smooth transition of power from the military to the NLD. She also took the same cooperative position as the military on the issue of the persecution of Rohingya people in Myanmar. However, the NLD government took a radical approach on the transformation of Myanmar from civil-military co-governance to complete civilian rule. This approach likely intensified resistance from the military. As exemplified in the Indonesian military reform, it was exactly because of Wahid's radical measures in military reform that military support was lost and Wahid was ultimately impeached. Therefore, Myanmar should seek incremental separation of the military from politics, rather than complete removal of military influence through once-and-for-all measures like amending the constitution or refusing to cooperate with the military.

3. Ethnic Separatism Must Be Effectively Resolved

The military's deep involvement in politics is largely rooted in the need for national security and unification. During the Sukarno era in Indonesia, frequent separatist movements pushed

the military towards the center of political power. During Suharto's rule, the soldiers were allowed to serve local administrative positions in order to ensure the state's long-term unity. Military reform was largely successful following democratic reform efforts because of the resolution of separatist movements in Papua and Aceh. The passage of two laws—Law No. 21/2001 on Special Autonomy for the Papua Province and Law No. 11/2006 on the Governing of Aceh—gave Papua and Aceh a high degree of autonomy and settled the issue of ethnic separatism. Although sporadic separatist activities continue to take place, they are unable to fundamentally alter the process of national unification. As a result, the military lost its legitimate reason for participating in politics, making reform easier to advance.

Likewise, Myanmar is facing serious ethnic separation movements. Ethnic groups such as the Karen, Kachin, Rakhine, Wa, and Kokang have strong desires for separation. They have established their own armed forces and sometimes exchange fire with the military. Some even hold semi-independent status from the Union. As a result, the long-term struggle against the ethnic separatist movement has become a useful excuse for the military to remain fully involved in politics. Solving the issue of ethnic separatism will help separate the military from politics.

4. Openness to Cooperation with the Military Must Be Maintained

Even with military reform, military personnel in Indonesia may still participate in politics through appointments or elections after they become inactive. Megawati, the pro-reform military leader Yudhoyono, and "civilian president" Jokowi all chose to cooperate with the military. They reserved a high percentage of seats in the cabinet for retired military officers and allowed them to participate in elections and administrative affairs at both the national and local levels. None of the presidents after the democratic reforms punished the military for its previous actions. As a result, civilian leaders have provided the military with enough political space and sense of security to reduce the risk of the military breaking from the civilian government and seizing power.

In contrast, tensions in Myanmar have consistently risen between the NLD and the military. The NLD frequently brings up the idea of "liquidating the military," resulting in military insecurity; the Burmese military consequentially equate any transition of power to the demise of their power and positions. After the 2015 general election, the NLD successfully took power because they refrained from using rhetoric like "liquidating the military" and showed a willingness to cooperate with the military. According to previous practice, the commander-in-chief of the military would have required the incumbent government to sign an exception law

before retirement. However, the NLD refused to sign for Min Aung Hlaing and his colleagues, which again raised their concerns for “liquidation” after retirement. In addition, the NLD refused to cooperate with the military in certain areas after taking power, which worsened the relationship between the two sides. Due to the concern that the NLD would significantly undermine the military’s interest after the military’s loss in the election, the military chose to stage a coup. Therefore, maintaining a cooperative and open attitude with the military and, to some extent, ensuring the core interests of the military can successfully limit the military’s participation in politics.

The thoughts expressed in this paper are of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of Stimson.

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^{viii} Tempo News, “Former TNI Chief Gatot Nurmantyo Runs for President,” *Tempo*, April 3, 2018, <https://en.tempo.co/read/917236/tempo-news-former-tni-chief-gatot-nurmantyo-runs-for-president>.

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^{xii} Yohanes Sulaiman, “Indonesia’s politicisation of the virus is stopping effective response,” *Southeast Asia Globe*, April 10, 2020, <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/indonesia-covid-19-response/>.