Military chiefs call the shots in the Indonesian cabinet

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Comments by Indonesia's Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono on Tuesday leave little room for doubt that the generals are calling the political shots in the government of President Abdurrahman Wahid. Speaking at a business breakfast in Jakarta, Sudarsono insisted that top officers would not be prosecuted for atrocities carried out in the province of Aceh and repeated an earlier warning that the military would seize control if Wahid did not rule properly.

Juwono's defence of the military top brass comes as a special military-civilian court is due to begin hearing five cases of "military abuse" involving rape, torture and murder. Under the Suharto regime, the army carried out a long and bloody suppression of the Free Aceh movement during which thousands of people were systematically tortured and killed. A government-sanctioned inquiry has called for Indonesia's former armed forces chiefs, including the present Coordinating Minister for Political Affairs and Security General Wiranto, to be put on trial for atrocities.

But Juwono ruled out the prosecution of anyone other than those soldiers who committed the crimes and their direct superiors. "We can't go up into the higher ranks as they were just carrying out state policy," he said. Such "democratic absolutism," he commented, would lead to an entire revision of Indonesian history and do little to help the nation overcome its troubles.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab has also made clear that the country's top officers will not be extradited to face any charges brought by international courts over their role in East Timor. "We will not deliver the generals to an international tribunal," he told a parliamentary commission. "We don't want generals unable to travel overseas and be arrested like Pinochet."

The comments comes just a fortnight after the military compelled Wahid to make an embarrassing reversal of his offer of a referendum in Aceh along the lines of East Timor. Facing strong opposition from the military, Wahid was compelled to "clarify" that any referendum would only be over autonomy and the implementation of Islamic law not independence. "Any attempt to separate Aceh from Indonesia is an act that cannot be tolerated. Aceh is part of our domain," he emphasised on Wednesday.

In his comments, Juwono not only opposed independence for Aceh but also any form of federalism for Indonesia that would provide significant autonomy for Aceh and other provinces such as Irian Jaya (West Papua) and Riau where separatist demands have been made. He warned that Indonesia faced disintegration if federalism was adopted. Among others, People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) Chairman Amien Rais, a key figure in fashioning Wahid's fragile coalition government, has advocated federalism as a means for containing separatist sentiment in Aceh and elsewhere.

Juwono made clear the real relations in the Wahid cabinet when he spoke of the need for a solution to the unrest in Aceh. "I don't think it's too late. I think we have a chance with President Gus Dur [Wahid's nickname], whose strong moral authority is an asset," he said. In other words, while the military will not permit Wahid to determine policy on Aceh, they are willing to exploit Wahid's "democratic" image for their own ends.

The military has clashed with pro-independence forces in Aceh and Irian Jaya over the last fortnight. At least 30 people were injured in Irian Jaya on December 2, when the military forcibly evicted a group of pro-independence protesters from a church in the town of Timika. Less than 24 hours before the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) was due to hold major rallies on

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December 4 to celebrate its founding, Wahid warned that “repressive actions” would be used to prevent Aceh breaking away. Despite the fact that GAM called on its supporters to avoid a confrontation with security forces, at least 12 people were injured.

Juwono's most sinister warning, however, concerned the fate of civilian rule. “In the end, if we don't put substance into the notion of civilian control over the military, sooner or later the military will come back with full force,” he said. It was Juwono's second statement in a little more than a fortnight strongly implying that the army would seize power again if the civilian government did not toe the line. Previously he referred to the possibility of “military-dominated rule like Pakistan and some African states”.

When Juwono was first selected as Defence Minister, he was widely hailed in the media, in Indonesia and internationally, as the first civilian to fill the role since the 1950s. But Juwono, whose name was put forward by Wiranto, served as a minister under both Suharto and Habibie and has the closest connections with the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI). He served for years as the deputy government of the military think tank known as the National Resilience Council. As the civilian face of the military, he, along with Wiranto, appears to be playing a more and more prominent role in laying down the law to the cabinet.

When it was formed, Wahid hailed his cabinet as “a government of national unity”. It was the product of an uneasy compromise between the military faction and all the major political parties, including the Suharto-era Golkar Party, the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P) of vice-president Megawati Sukarnoputri, Wahid's National Awakening Party and Rais' “axis force” grouping of Islamic parties.

Hamzah Haz, one of three coordinating ministers in the cabinet, has already been forced to resign amid rumours that he was the subject of a corruption investigation. Last Saturday Wahid indicated that three more of his ministers, also allegedly involved in graft, would be better off resigning.

In a bid to deflect blame from himself, Wahid rather bitterly described the process of “horse-trading” through which the cabinet was put together. Referring to the main faction leaders, he said: “So Pak Amien, Pak Akbar, Pak Wiranto, Mbak Mega and myself were trading cattle, thus as a result you have a cabinet like this. Originally the cabinet only comprised 18 people and I carefully selected them. This is what it is like to sell cows. In the past it was great because you had the market to yourself, but now you have to trade with others.”

The result is a deeply divided cabinet in which the military faction is increasingly calling the tune. The “democrats” Wahid and Megawati are little more than a convenient temporary façade for the army, which is widely discredited and distrusted after 32 years of Suharto's ruthless rule.

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