

Indonesian parliament expands military's role in government

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The Indonesian government of President Prabowo Subianto oversaw the passing of amendments to the country's armed forces law in parliament on March 20. The amendments allow active-duty military officers to serve in a greater number of government roles.

The 2004 TNI (Indonesian Armed Forces) Law reduced the number of civilian posts available to the military, after the collapse of the Suharto military dictatorship in 1998. It originally permitted active military personnel to serve in ten government positions, mostly related to security, such as the Defence Ministry and the state intelligence agency.

The new revisions, which were adopted unanimously by parliament, expanded this to include five more institutions: the Attorney General's Office, National Counterterrorism Agency, Maritime Security Agency, National Agency for Border Management, and National Disaster Mitigation Agency. According to the AFP news agency, serving officers can also take posts in a critical sixth institution: the Supreme Court.

Military personnel may be appointed to other areas of government, but must first retire from the military, as stated in the previous TNI Law. Additionally, the amendments raised retirement age by several years for most ranks, with four-star generals now able to serve until 63, up from 60.

The change is among the most significant actions taken by the Prabowo government since it came into office last October. The amendments were, however, a watered-down version of an earlier draft proposal, which would have allowed Prabowo the right to appoint serving officers anywhere in the government, according to a Reuters report.

The revisions were drafted largely behind closed doors and rushed through parliament in less than two months after Prabowo requested them. The drafting

process consisted of a series of secret meetings involving Prabowo, the Defence Ministry, and the Defence and Security Commission, held at a luxury hotel near Jakarta's parliament building. The bill was then approved by the Defence Commission and passed unanimously in a special plenary session of the House of Representatives.

The amendments immediately sparked protests, as hundreds of student activists camped outside parliament the night before the bill was passed. On the following day, the crowd grew to a thousand, with protesters holding banners reading "Against militarism and oligarchy!" and "The New Order [the name of the Suharto dictatorship] strikes back!" One student group present described the law as "democracy-killing."

By revising the military law, Prabowo, a former general in the Suharto regime, is taking a step towards dictatorial rule, under conditions of a massive social crisis in Indonesia as well as an international political shift to the right by capitalist governments.

What is being revived is the total control of every aspect of society by the military apparatus that existed under Suharto, known as *dwifungsi* (dual function). Military officers held leading positions not only in government, but in the state-owned enterprises, banks, the media, cultural institutions and elsewhere.

Since his October inauguration, Prabowo has declared his first term will see a "greater political centrality and policy influence for the military-security apparatus." On his very first day in office, he appointed his personal assistant Teddy Indra Wijaya, an active military officer, as cabinet secretary.

In blatant violation of the TNI Law, his cabinet is comprised of numerous serving military personnel in posts outside defence including transportation and agriculture. The cabinet includes retired military figures

in leading roles, such as Foreign Affairs Minister Sugiono, who was previously a first lieutenant in notorious special forces group Kopassus which carried out some of the bloodiest crimes of the Suharto regime. Prabowo himself was once one of its commanders.

Prabowo has begun to expand the military's role to public affairs. He has appointed active officers to the national food agency Bulog. His flagship Free Meal Program—a populist measure aimed at feeding 83 million schoolchildren—receives logistical support from the army.

The amendments to the military law have been publicly defended by several government officials, on the grounds that they are necessary due to domestic and geopolitical “challenges.”

Defence Minister Sjafrrie Sjamsoeddin, another former Kopassus officer, told parliament in March: “The geopolitical changes and global military technology require the military to transform... to face conventional and non-conventional conflicts.” Meanwhile, Budi Djiwandono, deputy chief of the commission overseeing the revisions and Prabowo’s nephew, dismissed concerns that the law signified a return to *dwifungsi*.

Armed Forces Commander General Agus Subiyanto declared that the pre-existing military law was outdated. “Adjustments are necessary to tackle various issues in implementing the fundamental norms of state policy and political decisions,” he said.

Prabowo’s moves towards establishing military political dominance take place amid the growth of mass opposition to his policies, as well as intensifying geopolitical tensions as the United States prepares for war against China.

The revised military law was passed just weeks after the unveiling of the president’s austerity campaign, slashing up to \$44 billion from the state budget, under the false name of “combatting inefficiency,” targeting education, health, and other vital social services. These measures provoked a widespread student protest movement across the archipelago, against the government’s austerity as well as the degradation of social conditions, rising cost of living, poverty, and unemployment.

However, attempts to expand the military’s role in Indonesian society predate Prabowo.

The 2004 TNI Law was an element of the Indonesian

establishment’s program of *reformasi*, or “democratic reformation” after the Suharto junta fell in 1998, and was nominally aimed at containing the army’s influence. But *reformasi* was a farce from the beginning, with military figures retaining powerful positions and much of the dictatorship’s structure remained intact, behind the “democratic” façade of elections.

Prabowo, who was Suharto’s son-in-law, attempted to set himself up as the dictator’s successor and was one of the bloodiest figures of the regime. Megawati Sukarnoputri, leader of the PDIP (the party most associated with *reformasi*), rehabilitated Prabowo politically as early as 2009 when she chose him as her vice-presidential running mate.

The previous president Joko Widodo, the PDIP’s candidate, who was widely promoted as a “reformer,” accelerated the process. During his time in office, networks of Suharto-era generals and officers played an increasingly prominent role in the government.

Widodo frequently violated the TNI Law, appointing an active duty general to head the national disaster agency in 2019. In 2023, nearly 2,600 active-duty officers were serving in civilian roles, according to Imparsial (Indonesian Human Rights Monitor). He effectively gave Prabowo his blessing in last year’s election when his son ran as vice-president on Prabowo’s ticket.

In the quarter century since the end of Suharto’s rule, the entire political establishment has covered up the crimes of the Indonesian military while paying lip service to democracy. It has now unanimously supported the expansion of the military’s role in government.



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