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Is Indonesia's Military Eyeing the Republic?

Prabowo Subianto, a former army commander and General Suharto's son-in-law, is running for president and seeking a return to military's dominance of Indonesia.

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On April 17, roughly 193 million Indonesians will cast their votes to elect representatives to the national parliament, provincial and district legislatures, and directly elect the president.

President Joko Widodo is running with the senior Islamic cleric Mar'uf Amin. A coalition of nine parties representing more than half of the current House of Representatives is backing Mr. Joko. He is campaigning on his achievements in office, particularly infrastructure development, welfare benefits, economic competitiveness and bureaucratic reform.

Mr. Joko is being challenged by Prabowo Subianto, a former special forces commander and head of the Great Indonesia Movement Party. Four parties, controlling almost 40 percent of the seats in the House, are backing Mr. Prabowo's run with the former fund manager Sandiaga Uno.

Mr. Prabowo has a controversial military record (from human-rights abuses to behaving outside the chain of command) and a combustible personality, and emphasizes "strong leadership" and economic populism in his campaigns. During the last presidential debate, he went on a boisterous tirade about the country's weaknesses, rather than countering Mr. Widodo's vague proposals with specific ideas. When questioned about his lack of trust in Tentara Nasional

Indonesia, the Indonesian military, also known as T.N.I., Mr. Prabowo loudly claimed “I am more T.N.I. than many within T.N.I.”

More telling is Mr. Prabowo's party's manifesto, which seeks a return to Indonesia's 1945 Constitution — a move that would abolish direct elections, remove presidential term limits and “correct liberal democracy” in Indonesia. His party also seeks to eliminate the distinction between defense and security — in an echo of the authoritarian regime of his father-in-law, former President Suharto — which could be used to justify the military's omnipresence. The current distinction that led to the separation of the police from the military was hard-fought during the democratic reform.

This is partly why analysts see the role of the Indonesian military, sidelined after the end of Mr. Suharto's authoritarian order in 1998, as one of the key stakes in the election. There are growing concerns that whoever wins, the military will make a comeback.

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Mr. Joko's tolerance if not appeasement of the military's growing public role has added to these fears. During his term in office, the Indonesian military reinserted itself into nonmilitary policies, such as counterterrorism, antidrug campaigns and civic action programs.

Research by the Jakarta-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies, where I work, shows that between 2014 and 2017, the military and defense ministry signed 133 deals with ministries, social organizations and universities on various programs, from basic military training to rural development projects.

Mr. Joko also appointed retired generals as his chief of staff, defense minister and two coordinating ministers. He recently wanted to send more active-duty officers to civilian agencies and ministries to provide “temporary jobs” to hundreds of colonels and dozens of generals currently without billets.

Mr. Joko is not seeking to actively bring back the military to dominate the government, but he lacks the political capital, interest and experience to closely manage the military. He prefers to leave its management to his closest advisers — mostly retired generals — and to the military leadership.

A former furniture businessman who became the mayor of Solo, a city in central Java, and governor of Jakarta, Mr. Joko neither held a national position nor hailed from the military-backed Suharto establishment. But his qualities as an “outsider” candidate have also been his undoing as president. Without his own strong political machine and network, and having to balance a fragile coalition of parties, Mr. Joko relied on the support of the security establishment.

The Indonesian military — one of the most popular institutions in the country — retains a territorial command structure that parallels civilian governments from the national level down to the villages. The military's public support goes a long way in governing the country.

Mr. Joko has largely allowed the military leadership to protect its corporate interests — from arms spending to autonomy over organizational policies — even as it encroaches on the civilian public domain.

The new generation of Indonesian military officers who rose through the ranks in the 1990s and 2000s privately disapprove of Mr. Suharto's New Order-style expansive political presence. As junior officers at the forefront of the New Order in the late 1980s and early 1990s, they were often castigated by members of the public for every government failure, which they detested.

Yet the Indonesian military continues to struggle with organizational challenges going back to the democratic transition in 1998. Back then, the military was plagued with internal rivalry, sluggish organizational procedures and antiquated arms. Thousands of officers previously assigned to nonmilitary posts such as district chiefs or local parliamentarians had to compete for scarce military positions.

As a consequence, the officer corps has been suffering from a lack of professional growth for over a decade. Hundreds of serving colonels and

dozens of generals had to wait for years for their billets, exacerbating internal tension and rivalry.

But rather than overhauling the military's internal institutions — from doctrinal precepts to personnel management and education and training — to meet the new realities, successive administrations focused on depoliticizing the military and compensating its loss of power with arms modernization and budgetary increases.

Without effective guidance and control from Mr. Joko, the military's solution to its professional mobility was to expand its nonmilitary roles, albeit within the limits of existing laws. The recent growth in the military's public role reflects President Joko's passive tolerance and the military's efforts to redefine its post-authoritarian role and address internal challenges.

Whoever wins the election, the Indonesian military will not disappear from the political scene but its role will be sharply different from one administration to another.

If Mr. Joko wins, his passive tolerance of the military will continue and the civilian leadership will not drive defense policy. The military will encroach on civilian domains but it won't bring back the New Order and end democracy. There will be democratic debates, freedom to criticize both Mr. Joko and the military, and pushbacks when civil rights are threatened.

The same cannot be said of Mr. Prabowo, who is more likely to overturn democratic foundations and promote the military as the backbone of a strong leadership. He is likely to entertain the idea of bringing back a New Order-style military rule, even though many within the military may disagree. If that happens, we should see more civil-military conflicts and political instability in the years to come.

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