

[ADRN Issue Briefing]

**Indonesian Parliament Passes Law
Expanding Military's Role in Government**

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More than three weeks since the House of Representatives (DPR) ratified the amendment to the Indonesian National Armed Forces Law (Undang-undang Tentara Nasional Indonesia: UU TNI), the law's official text has yet to be released to the general public. Given the formal procedure of legislation in the country, President Prabowo Subianto has thirty days to either sign or not sign the law. Regardless of Prabowo's decision, the revised TNI Law will remain in effect due to the fact that the law-making process in Indonesia is basically a joint-venture between the executive and legislative branches.

As reported widely by domestic and international media outlets, the promulgation of the revised TNI Law in March 2025 has sparked significant protests throughout the archipelago. These protests have been led by students and civil society groups across ideologies and political spectrums. It is reported that mass rallies in various sizes took place in approximately forty-six cities, extending from Banda Aceh in Sumatra to Manokwari in Papua.¹ The protestors called for the repeal of the law, demanding a thorough and transparent public deliberation. The parliament's working committee, which was initially charged with deliberating the revised TNI Law with the government, was caught off guard holding a limited meeting behind closed doors.

What are the underlying issues that have triggered the strong disapproval of students and civil society organizations regarding the ratification of the revised TNI Law?

Critics argued that the amendment undermines civilian supremacy and sustains military intervention in social and political affairs. The Coalition of Civil Society for Security Sector Reform, consisting of non-governmental organization activists, academics, and researchers working on human rights, democracy, and security issues, expressed concerns that the amendment will deteriorate military professionalism. The coalition argued the armed forces should focus on strengthening the nation's defense capability against external threats, protecting national territory and sovereignty, instead of meddling in civilian affairs. Thus, the priority must be given to the advancement of military modernization in order to improve the TNI capability. In the following assessment, the validity of this criticism will be examined.

¹ See the X/Twitter account of "Ekspedisi Indonesia Baru." <https://x.com/idbaruid> (Accessed April 14, 2025)

Firewall Between the Military and the Government Get Eroded

After the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime in May 1998, clear demarcation was established to disassociate the military from the civilian government. Active military officers were removed from the position of head of regional administration; if they wished to continue, they had to resign from military service. Additionally, the military was banned from running any kind of businesses. During Suharto's rule, active officers were assigned to occupy a military faction within the legislature structure, exercising the same rights and responsibilities as representatives from political parties and social organizations. This peculiar provision was eventually revoked, and the military retreated from national and regional legislatures in 2004. On top of this series of reforms, the highlight was the separation of military and police institutions, underscoring the former's primary responsibility for external defense and the latter for domestic security.

The recent passage of the revised TNI law has introduced significant changes. Firstly, the amendment allowed the expansion of TNI's military operations other than war (MOOTW or *operasi militer selain perang*/OMSP), adding two extra missions namely cyber defense missions and the protection of Indonesian citizens and national interests abroad. Prior to this expansion, the armed forces were already mandated to undertake fourteen non-external defense activities, including counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, international peacekeeping missions, and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. The government asserts that the inclusion of the cyber domain is imperative in the light of the continued transformation of security threats in the contemporary global landscape. The Indonesian military has initiated the development of its cyber defense capability, establishing a specialized cyber unit tasked with supporting command and control systems and intelligence collection. Meanwhile, the second newly added mission aims to provide a legal justification for the TNI to evacuate and assist Indonesian citizens abroad in times of crisis. This includes incidents such as the abduction or hostage-taking situations of Indonesian citizens by hostile entities, as well as armed robbery against Indonesian-flagged vessels in international waters.

The absence of an oversight mechanism to oversee the government's cyber and surveillance operations raises concern, as it potentially facilitates abuse of power and violations of human rights by state apparatus. It is difficult to expect that the House of Representatives could fulfill its mandated oversight responsibilities. The majority of DPR members came from political parties aligned with the ruling government, effectively curtailing the capacity for authentic checks and balances between the legislative and executive branches. Critics also pointed out the risk of militarization within cyberspace that could harm the public's rights to access information and freedom of expression (SAFEnet 2025).

Secondly, the revised law stipulated that active military officers could be appointed to the five non-defense ministries and state agencies. These include the national border management agency (BNPP), the national disaster mitigation agency (BNPB), the national counterterrorism agency (BNPT), the maritime security agency (Bakamla), and the attorney general office (Kejaksaan Agung).

In its original 2004 version, the TNI Law stipulated that the appointment of active uniformed officers was permissible in ten security-related institutions, i.e. (1) coordinating ministry of political and legal affairs; (2) ministry of defense; (3) national resilience council (*dewan ketahanan nasional*); (4) presidential military secretariat; (5) state intelligence agency; (6) state cryptography agency; (7) national resilience agency (*lembaga ketahanan nasional*); (8) national search and rescue agency; (9) national anti-narcotics agency, and; (10) supreme court.

The problem is that, throughout the years, active military secondments have already exceeded the limits established for civilian ministries and state agencies, thereby extending the scope of TNI roles without the requisite legal justification. Recent examples include the appointment of Lieutenant Colonel Teddy Indra Wijaya as cabinet secretary, Major General Ahmad Rizal Ramdhani as head of the food resilience task force at the Ministry of Agriculture, Major General Maryono as inspectorate general at the Ministry of Transportation, Major General Irham Waroihan as inspectorate general at the Ministry of Agriculture, and First Admiral Ian Heriyawan at the Hajj Organizing Agency.

The amendment also extended the retirement age for military personnel (Dongoran 2025). Specifically, the retirement age for non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel was increased from 53 to 55. For mid-ranking officers, up to and including the rank of colonel, the maximum permissible age for continued service is increased to 58. The retirement age for generals is determined by their star rank: 60 for one-star, 61 for two-star, and 62 for three-star, respectively. The retirement age for a four-star general, i.e. TNI commander and the services' chiefs of staff (army, navy, air force), is 63, and it can be extended a maximum of two times, subject to the president's approval. The TNI Commander General Agus Subiyanto stated that the extension of retirement age provided a broader opportunity for military personnel to enjoy career advancement faster.

It is noteworthy that in his recent interviews with seven journalists—six of whom are editors-in-chief of print, broadcast, and internet media—at his residency in Hambalang, Bogor, West Java, President Prabowo Subianto admitted that the extension of high-ranking officers' retirement age has been the main objective of the TNI Law revision. He expressed dissatisfaction over the swift turnover of three-star and four-star general positions. This revelation is particularly noteworthy as it suggests a strategic intent on the president's interests to consolidate his authority and subjective control over the armed forces.

In contrast with the lawmakers' optimism, critics expressed concern that extending the retirement age could disrupt the cycle of personnel regeneration, causing the military's hierarchical pyramid structure to become imbalanced (Dongoran 2025). In recent years, TNI faced problems with high-ranking officers who are not currently assigned to active duties. In response, the headquarters has been directing these officers to strategic posts outside the military organization. The extension of retirement age has the potential to exacerbate this situation.

While not as prominent in the public consciousness as the aforementioned three issues, the amendment changed the nature of the relationship between TNI and the Ministry of Defense. Previously, the military's authority in formulating defense policy and strategy was arranged to be “under the coordination” (*dalam koordinasi*) of the Ministry of Defense. The revised law, however, established that the TNI's authority to define national defense policy and strategy is to be exercised “in coordination” (*di dalam koordinasi*) with the Ministry of Defense. This means that the position of military headquarters becomes relatively equal to that of the Ministry of Defense. Consequently, the enhanced autonomy of the TNI in strategic affairs is likely to diminish civilian control over military matters via the ministry.

III Winds of Authoritarian Turn

The ratification of the revised TNI Law is indeed a worrisome indication of democratic decline in Indonesia. It reinforced the expansion of the military's involvement in non-defense affairs. While the original TNI Law requires an update, considering the evolving security threat landscape on the

national and global stages, the lawmakers overlooked the crucial principle of civilian supremacy and the maintenance of military professionalism.

Civil society rightfully urged both the government and parliament to evaluate the ongoing conduct of the MOOTW and active military personnel appointment to non-defense agencies, prior to further expanding the military's role.

Only five months after President Prabowo Subianto took office, the government has deployed the military to various developmental sectors unrelated to external defense functions. TNI territorial structures across the archipelago has been directly involved in farming, forestry, and natural resources sectors, to name a few. In October 2024, five new infantry battalions were established to accelerate the development of “food estate” (*lumbung pangan*) in Papua, staffed with active personnel learning agricultural science at the Indonesia University of Defense.

The military's involvement in the distribution of “free nutritious meals” (*makan bergizi gratis*: MBG) to school children has been identified as a pivotal element of Prabowo's 2024 election campaign. The TNI headquarter activated 351 army district commands (*kodim*), 41 air force bases (*lanud*), and 14 main naval bases (*lantamal*) simultaneously to support the MBG program nationwide (Aditya and Prabowo 2025). Furthermore, the government assigned Lieutenant General Novy Helmy Prasetya, an active three-star general, to lead a state-owned enterprise specializing in food logistics, distribution, and price stabilization (Bulog). This action is a clear transgression against the TNI Law.

This series of events indicates a deliberate and systematic expansion of the military's role within the Indonesian government. The foundation of military reform, laid in the early years of democratization, have ultimately proved unsuccessful.

It is also imperative to acknowledge the opaque nature of the revised TNI law-making process. In addition to the previously referenced closed-door meeting between government officials and the parliament's working committee, both the government and the DPR also failed to provide the general public with access to the revised TNI draft. This lack of transparency and accountability contributed to the emergence of widespread protests. Of particular concern is Prabowo Subianto's response to the protests, wherein he accused the demonstrators of being lackeys of foreign powers without providing any evidence.² The employment of stigmatization and othering has been a potent tactic in Prabowo's playbook, used to discredit his critics.

Considering the events surrounding the revision of the TNI Law, it is evident that there is a serious symptom of authoritarian turn in Indonesia. ■

² See the video of President Prabowo Subianto's dialogue with the editors-in-chief of six Indonesian media outlets, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WLpXmnBmxo&t=7307s> (Accessed April 14, 2025)

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