

# The Impact of the Rise of Islamic Extremism on Civil-Military Relations in Indonesia

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YEO QIN-LIANG, JUL 7 2022

Since the beginning of Jokowi's presidency in 2014, the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) has become more involved in civilian affairs. This is marked by the appointment of retired TNI officers into Jokowi's cabinet, increased reliance on the TNI's territorial command system, and the opening of more positions for TNI officers in ministries and state institutions.[1]

Scholars point to the motivation and ability of the TNI in explaining this trend. The TNI wants to strengthen its political influence over state legislation and policies to safeguard its material interests.[2] TNI officers also tenaciously hold onto the mindset that they are the "guardians of the nation".[3]

Existing literature also highlights the opportunities for the TNI to gain more influence in civilian affairs during Jokowi's tenure. Jokowi's lack of familiarity with security and defence affairs, as well as his lack of background from the political and military elite, has made it necessary for him to ally with (present and retired) officers to control the TNI.[4]

However, absent from the current literature is how the rise of Islamic extremism has created more opportunities for the TNI to intrude in civilian affairs. Here, I define extremism as "the intolerance of the opinions of others, such that one believes it is acceptable to force others to accept one's position on religion, either physically or intellectually".[5] The rise of Islamic extremism in Indonesia is evident in two ways. Firstly, the popularity of extremist Islamist groups has grown, especially in regions where mainstream Muslim authorities – the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah – are weakly institutionalized.[6] Secondly, the number of Islamic terrorist attacks in Indonesia has increased from 2010 to 2020.[7] Considering that Islamic extremism constitutes part of the political context in which the TNI and Indonesian state interacts with one another, we should expect it to have some ramifications on the civil-military relations in Indonesia. Therefore, I ask: How has the rise of Islamic extremism facilitated the TNI's intrusion into civilian affairs?

This essay aims to fill this literature gap. I argue that the TNI has exploited the rise of Islamic extremism to claim more stake in Indonesia's internal security affairs, with the aim of enhancing its material interests. Under General Gatot Nurmantyo's leadership from 2015 to 2017, the TNI collaborated with hardline Islamists in its "proxy war" against "new-style communism". It also capitalized on the upsurge of Islamic terrorism to legitimize its involvement in counterterrorism. After Air Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto took over the helm in 2018, the TNI leveraged the rise in Islamic terrorism to push for a new anti-terrorism law that codified its role in counterterrorism.

The rest of this essay is structured as follows. Section One introduces the material interest of the TNI. Section Two examines the TNI under General Gatot Nurmantyo's leadership from 2014 to 2017. Section Three explores the TNI under Marshal Hadi Tjahjanto's leadership from 2018. Finally, Section Five concludes.

### Material Interests of the TNI

Like most militaries, the salient material interests that the TNI seeks to defend include: (i) maintaining its internal cohesion, discipline, and morale; (ii) protecting its image, prestige, and legitimacy; and (iii) securing its material

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interests, ranging from personnel promotions to the defence budget.[8] The TNI perceives that its material interests are being threatened by internal and external factors.

Internally, the TNI has a prolonged surplus of mid-career military officers – mainly colonels and generals – with insufficient promotion opportunities. Surpluses occur when there are too many officers and too few positions available for them. Between 2011 and 2017, the Indonesian Army (TNI-AD) had a surplus of about 30 generals and 330 colonels per year on average.[9] This annual surplus is projected to increase to about 500-600 colonels by 2027.[10] Significantly, this means that there will be more officers competing for each promotion opportunity in the future, thereby intensifying the rivalry among the younger generation of officers.

And the laggards are likely to become bitter. One reason is that these officers are often re-classified as Out of Formation (*Luar Formasi*) personnel and given “non-jobs” such as “special assistants” to various offices or headquarters.[11] Unsurprisingly, these officers tend to become restless and discontented as their prestige and status erodes. Another reason is that these officers often feel that they deserved a promotion (as opposed to their peers). This arises because promotions at higher ranks and senior appointments are primarily distributed based on political patronage, rather than a meritocratic process.[12] Throughout the TNI, senior officers cultivate personal loyalty and support by mentoring juniors, whose personal obligation to the senior “*bapak*” is deep and long-lasting.[13] Hence, promotions within the TNI are associated with arbitrariness and corruption, making those who are excluded resentful.

Therefore, the TNI leadership is wary that the prolonged surplus of military officers could exacerbate factionalism within the TNI. As officers bitterly compete for scarce organizational resources, military factionalism is a recurring pattern.[14] In the 1970s, it arose between supporters of General Ali Moertopo, Special Operations Chief and General Sumitro, Head of Suharto’s secret police. In the 1990s, factionalism emerged between followers of Lieutenant General Prabowo Subianto, the Army Special Forces Commander, and General Wiranto, the Commander of the Indonesian Armed Forces. Therefore, the TNI perceives its surplus of military officers as an internal threat to its material interests.

Externally, the TNI’s aim to expand its stake in Indonesia’s internal security is often opposed by the Indonesian national police (POLRI). In 1999, the POLRI was formally separated from the military, leading to the transfer of the internal security role from the military to the POLRI. Nonetheless, the TNI has remained unwilling to completely surrender its stake in internal security as it will endanger the existence of its territorial command structure, which was introduced in 1979 to anchor the military in local affairs. In contemporary times, the TNI continues to attach great importance to maintaining its territorial command structure, because it facilitates informal political transactions between officers and politicians at the local level.[15] Moreover, the territorial commands serve as a massive platform to accommodate the surplus of officers in the TNI.[16] Under the pretext of safeguarding Indonesia’s internal security, such as combating terrorism or quelling civil unrests, the TNI can justify the relevance of its territorial commands.

Crucially, the TNI is wary of the POLRI’s opposition towards its intrusions into matters of internal security. The POLRI has consistently worked to ensure that the TNI remains a junior partner in the counterterrorism turf. It seeks to prevent the TNI from gaining the legal authority (through Indonesia’s anti-terrorism legislation) to carry out counterterrorism operations independently. It also advocates that the TNI remains subordinated to the POLRI’s directives in any joint operations between the two organizations. Moreover, the POLRI has strengthened its elite counterterrorism unit – the Densus 88 – to reduce its reliance on the TNI’s special forces to mount operations.[17] As such, the TNI perceives that its stake in internal security is not sufficiently secured yet.

In short, the TNI perceives that its material interests are being threatened by its internal issue of surplus officers, as well as the potential opposition of the POLRI against its involvement in domestic security matters. The next two sections will examine how the TNI has leveraged the rise of Islamic extremism to preserve its material interests by claiming more stake in Indonesia’s internal security affairs.

## TNI’s politics under General Gatot

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In July 2015, General Gatot Nurmantyo was appointed as the TNI Commander and saddled with challenges to the military's material interests. The TNI's internal cohesion was threatened by the surplus of officers, as well as Gatot's own lack of support in either the Kopassus or Kostrad. Moreover, the POLRI continued to assert its dominance over internal security matters and resisted the TNI's encroachment. What then was Gatot's strategy to preserve the TNI's material interests?

## *TNI-Islam rapprochement against "new-style communism"*

Gatot's answer was the invention of a proxy war against "new-style communism" that could bolster the TNI's role in internal security. According to Gatot, Indonesia was not under direct attacks, but was invisibly penetrated by foreign powers which aimed to foster social cleavages and destabilized the country to steal its rich natural resources. He iterated that foreign powers were planting foreign values in Indonesian society, mainly through groups that advocated for LGBT rights, social equality, human rights, environmental protection, and more. Gatot's conspiracy theory added that many of these social groups could be the forces that planned to revive the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), which was all but eradicated by Suharto's army in the 1960s.[18] Gatot then stressed that the TNI must spearhead efforts to crush this "new-style communism" and prevent it from taking over Indonesia.

Crucially, the TNI relied upon the support of hardline conservative Islamist groups to propagate its narrative of a proxy war against "new-style communism". These Islamist groups found a natural affinity with the TNI's proxy war, because they genuinely believed that the infiltration of 'foreign' ideas had eroded Indonesian values and unity. They hence played an active role in fueling the TNI's proxy war. Firstly, famous conservative Islamist groups – such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and the Indonesia Mujahidin Council – helped legitimize the existence of the "new-style communism" through their propaganda campaigns. For example, they utilized public speeches and social media to spread false and misleading news that China uses its investments as a ploy to export masses of migrant workers, who were illegally living across Indonesia and circulating Chinese communism in villages.[19] Secondly, conservative Islamist groups supported the TNI's implementation of its major social program – termed "Defend the Nation" (*Bela Negara*) – against the invisible "new-style communism". This program imposed short-term military training on the public at each local military command. In areas where Islamic extremism was strong, Islamist groups became highly influential in galvanizing members of the public to participate in the program.[20] They also became major participants of the program – in January 2017, the TNI was found to be providing military training for members of the "anti-vice" vigilante group Fron Pembela Islam (FPI) in Lebak, Banten.[21] Overall, the *Bela Negara* program is expected to recruit 100 million cadres across the archipelago by 2025.[22]

Significantly, the TNI began emphasizing that its territorial command system was essential to implement the *Bela Negara* program throughout Indonesia, which was necessary to suppress the threat of "new-style communism".[23] This enhanced the legitimacy of the territorial commands and helped rebuff any attempt at dismantling them. At the same time, the TNI pressured the Indonesian government into providing more budget to the local commands – about \$4.5 million annually – to run the program.[24] This has enabled the TNI to scale up the program and increase the number of military personnel stationed at the local commands, hence helping to ameliorate the issue of surplus officers. Therefore, the "proxy war" – along with the vital support of conservative Islamic groups – has helped the TNI to preserve its material interests.

## *Claiming a larger stake in combating Islamic terrorism*

Furthermore, under Gatot's leadership, the TNI exploited the public's fear over the rise of Islamic terrorism to claim more stake in counterterrorism. The emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in 2014 and its active recruitment of Indonesians had sparked deep fears that the havoc created by ISIS in the Middle East would soon come to Indonesia.[25] This fear was exacerbated by the January 2016 attacks, which were the first major acts of terror in years.[26] Several explosions went off around the Sarinah complex, the earliest foreign-style shopping mall in Indonesia, causing the death of four civilians in total. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attacks. TNI's public statements further fueled public fears. In June 2017, for instance, General Gatot claimed: "Almost in all Indonesian provinces, except for Papua, there are ISIS sleeper cells." [27] Terrorism analysts were quick to refute Gatot's hyperbole.[28]

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Beyond stirring public fears, the TNI was equally adept at expanding its role in counterterrorism. Through its propaganda, the TNI portrayed itself as an essential partner to the POLRI in counterterrorism. In particular, it trumpeted its success in hunting down and killing Santoso, the leader of the terrorist group East Indonesia Mujahidin (MIT), in a joint military and police operation in July 2016.[29] The TNI then stressed the importance of its territorial command system in providing comprehensive intelligence that reached right down to the remotest village and the trained manpower necessary to mount large-scale counterterrorism operations.[30] Significantly, this enhanced the legitimacy of the territorial command system, which has allowed the TNI to establish more district-level commands (with the stated intent of supporting counterterrorism operations).[31] Again, this not only helped ameliorate TNI's issue of surplus officers, but also strengthened the TNI's grip over internal security affairs. Therefore, the TNI has successfully leveraged the rise of Islamic terrorism to preserve its material interests during Gatot's tenure as the TNI Commander.

## TNI's politics under Air Chief Marshal Tjahjanto

However, Gatot's boisterous actions drew the ire of Jokowi. The proxy war demagogy had fostered opposition towards Jokowi, who had welcomed foreign direct investment from China for infrastructure development. Also, the TNI's reproachment with hardline Islamists could empower the latter in their opposition against Jokowi. This would compromise Jokowi's standing in the 2019 presidential election. As such, Jokowi expedited the appointment of Air Chief Marshal Tjahjanto Hadi – a closer ally – in December 2017 to replace Gatot.[32] Similar to his predecessor, Tjahjanto must contend with the surplus of military officers and preserve TNI's stake in counterterrorism. Under his leadership, the TNI would leverage the rise of Islamic extremism to institutionalize its stake in counterterrorism. However, the TNI would cease its proxy war and improve its ties with the POLRI.[33]

### *Cementing TNI's stake in counterterrorism*

In May 2018, a series of terrorist attacks shocked Indonesia. From May 8 to 10, Jemaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD) extremists mounted a hostage siege at the headquarters for the POLRI Mobile Brigade in South Jakarta, during which they executed five officers.[34] On May 13, a middle-class family – including the wife and children – bombed three churches in Surabaya.[35] The following day, another ISIS-inspired family on two motorcycles detonated themselves at a Surabaya police post.[36] These devastating attacks were unlike any other Indonesians have ever seen. They not only signaled an escalation of the ISIS-linked threat, but also that everyday folks and women increasingly were active perpetrators of violent extremism. Furthermore, the involvement of children suggested that jihadists were indoctrinating young Indonesians and fostering new generations of jihadists. This stirred public pressure upon the Indonesian government to quell the rise of Islamic terrorism.

This created an opportune time for the TNI to push for a new anti-terrorism law that would codify its role in counterterrorism. Up till that the May 2018 attacks, the TNI's attempts had been futile. As early as February 2016, the Jokowi administration had submitted an anti-terrorist draft bill to the Parliament. The conservative opposition faction – comprised of the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) and the Greater Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) – argued that an incumbent government could use the new law to oppress Islam and the political opposition.[37] This led to a deadlock in the Parliament. However, in the aftermath of the May 2018 attacks, no party or faction wanted to be seen as obstructing the negotiation process.[38] This encouraged the Parliament and Jokowi's cabinet to set aside their differences and work quickly toward a compromise.

Recognizing this shift, the TNI took meticulous steps to facilitate the passing of the new anti-terrorism bill. Firstly, Tjahjanto negotiated a draft bill with Tito that accommodated both the TNI's and POLRI's interests.[39] This entailed compromises from the TNI and POLRI but ensured that both organizations were united in advocating for the draft bill, thereby facilitating its acceptance in the Parliament. Tjahjanto then collaborated with Tito and the DPR Chair Muhammad Syalfi to socialize and negotiate the provisions of the draft bill with members of the parliament – through personal meetings and calls – prior to the parliament sitting in May.[40] This helped secure the necessary votes for the bill to pass in Parliament. Finally, at the advice of Tjahjanto and Tito, Jokowi issued the Parliament an ultimatum to revise the anti-terrorism law by the end of its June sitting term, or he would use his executive powers to issue a Governmental Regulation in Lieu of Law (*Perppu*).[41] Unwilling to be bypassed on an issue of high national

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importance, the Parliament was pressured into passing the bill.

On May 25, the Parliament passed the anti-terrorism bill into law, thereby institutionalizing the TNI's role in counterterrorism. Under this new law, the TNI was legally permitted to participate in counterterrorism activities only when requested to do so by the POLRI and with the approval of the President. While this barred the TNI from undertaking any independent anti-terrorist operations, it codified the TNI's role in counterterrorism.[42] On this legal basis, the TNI would gradually cement its stake in counterterrorism. In the latter half of 2018, the TNI and POLRI mounted several joint operations targeted at the terrorist groups JAD and Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT).[43] In July 2019, the TNI reactivated its Joint Special Operations Command (*Koopsus*), which comprises personnel from the Army's Special Forces (*Kopassus*), the Navy's Denjaka specialized squad, and the Air Force's Bravo-90 Special Force.[44] Beyond mounting counterterrorism operations, the *Kopassus* would also strengthen and manage the intelligence networks at the territorial commands to facilitate the early detection of terrorists. The *Koopsus* is expected to receive an annual operating budget of US\$106.9 million.[45]

Overall, this enhances the TNI's material interests. The establishment of a new unit and expansion of the territorial command system create more positions for officers, which helps alleviate the TNI's structural issue of surplus officers. Moreover, the enhanced legitimacy of the territorial command system ensures its longevity, strengthening the TNI's presence across the archipelago. Therefore, the TNI has successfully leveraged the rise of Islamic extremism to enhance its material interests.

## Conclusion

In short, this essay argues that the TNI has exploited the rise of Islamic extremism to claim more stake in Indonesia's internal security affairs, with the objective of preserving its material interests. Under Gatot, hardline Islamists became the TNI's partners in a "proxy war" against "new-style communism". The TNI also capitalized on the escalation in the incidents of Islamic terrorism to legitimize its involvement in counterterrorism. Under Tjahjanto, the TNI leveraged the rise of Islamic terrorism to advance a new anti-terrorism law that codified its role in counterterrorism.

There are perhaps other secondary explanations on how the rise of Islamic extremism has facilitated the TNI's intrusion into civilian affairs. Jokowi could genuinely believe that bolstering the military's involvement in counterterrorism helps mitigate threats of terrorism. Additionally, the Indonesian public might agree that the TNI can provide valuable support to the POLRI's counterterrorism operations. Nonetheless, this essay demonstrates that the TNI's desire to preserve its material interests is key to explaining how the rise of Islamic extremism has facilitated its intrusion into Indonesia's civilian affairs.

What then lies ahead? The threat of Islamic extremism is likely to persist in Indonesian society. Just in March 2021, two terrorist attacks and the arrest of nearly 100 suspects highlighted that pro-Islamic States cells and Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) cells remain active.[46] The TNI is unlikely to remain satisfied with playing second fiddle to the POLRI in counterterrorism and will exploit such opportunities to expand its turf. Civil society activists who are concerned about the militarization of counterterrorism and the encroachment of the TNI in civilian affairs should, therefore, continue keeping the TNI in check.

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