

PERSPECTIVE

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The Growing Role of the Military in Counter-Terrorism in Southeast Asia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Military forces have gained a more prominent role in countering terrorism in Southeast Asian countries, particularly in the Philippines and Indonesia.
- Law-enforcement agencies' perceived unpreparedness and even failure to prevent and effectively deal with the attacks in Marawi City in the Philippines and Surabaya in Indonesia in May 2017 and May 2018 respectively, helped to elevate the role of armed forces.
- The military's traditionally strong or embedded role in these countries together with its extensive territorial presence, has provided it with a natural role in countering threats or acts of terrorism.
- The enhanced role of the military in internal security operations raises concerns about past abuses of human rights by the military, especially in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

The increasing numbers of attacks by Southeast Asian militant groups and radicalized individuals pledging allegiance to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), since at least 2014, and in particular the Marawi attack in the Philippines have put new stress on regional governments to effectively address the growing security challenge.

Law-enforcement agencies and their special operations units, the principal anti-terrorism actors in most countries in Southeast Asia, suffer from lack of capacity and resources—manpower and finances—as well as often rampant corruption and low levels of public trust to deal with the bigger threat.¹ These actual or perceived challenges have rekindled strong voices for greater military involvement in counter-terrorism in Southeast Asia, especially the Philippines and Indonesia.

In Singapore and Malaysia the police and its intelligence services function well. Still, the heightened threat of terrorism convinced the Singapore government to form a new all-military special operations unit, the Army Deployment Force, to create a rapid response element to combat any terror attack in the city state. Similarly, in 2016, Malaysian government set up a new combined-services rapid deployment unit, the National Special Operations Force (NSOF), placed directly under the Prime Minister's office, to provide the first response in the event of a terror attack.² In Myanmar, the military—or Tatmadaw—has again taken a dominant role in searching and detaining, or killing, Muslim militant fighters, in the wake of the continuing violence against the Rohingya Muslims in northern Arakan State. In Thailand, the ruling military junta, who had staged a coup d'état in May 2015, has increased the military's presence in the country's restive deep South. The battle of Marawi in Mindanao, in the southern Philippines, which lasted from May until October 2017, showed the Philippine National Police's (PNP) lack of capacity to address the terrorist threat in the country, leaving the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), with its superior manpower and firepower, as the only viable state actor capable of liberating the Marawi City from the IS-affiliated militants. In Indonesia, the long-standing calls for a stronger involvement of the military, the TNI, in internal security, including counter-terrorism, became louder again following the perceived inability of the national police, POLRI, to prevent or interdict the series of suicide bombings against three Catholic churches in Surabaya, Indonesia in May 2018.

The next two sections take a closer look at the growing role of the military in counter-terrorism in the Philippines and Indonesia.

THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippine government's counter-terrorism responses have historically favoured the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) as the dominant security service.³ Since 2010, however, the government has attempted to pass on the baton to the National Police of the Philippines (PNP), with a mandate to address threats of terrorism in the country. The change,

however, has been at best slow and incomplete.⁴ Due to much historical baggage, the national police is probably the least trusted government institution in the Philippines and therefore lacks popular support in effectively countering terrorism in the country. The PNP is deemed to be deeply corrupt and uses draconian measures and questionable verdicts for detention.⁵ Furthermore, the PNP lacks adequate capacity and training to effectively address counter-terrorism challenges without the assistance of the armed forces, which have enjoyed over two decades of strong US military support in training, funding and organization.⁶

In May 2017, the Maute and Abu Sayyaf groups, pledging allegiance to the Islamic State, took over the southern Philippines' city of Marawi, in Mindanao. With the national security agencies taken by surprise, it took the Philippine military five months to free the city in a brutal urban combat for which the AFP was unprepared. Ultimately, in October 2017, with the weaponry, intelligence and training assistance from the United States and Australia, the AFP was able to clear the Maute and Abu Sayyaf Group militants from Marawi and kill or capture some of the key leaders of the militant groups, including Isnilon Hapilon and the Maute brothers. The siege showed that only the military had the manpower and firepower to combat the IS forces in frontal combat, whereas other security services, notably the police, were quickly overwhelmed.

In the aftermath of the liberation of Marawi, the AFP began a campaign against the remnants of the scattered (and now splintered, yet re-grouping) militant groups. Renewed attention was paid to the Bangsamoro Independence Freedom Fighters (BIFF), a militant breakaway group of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) that is in advanced peace talks with the central government for autonomy in the Muslim Mindanao. Since October 2017, the army's Joint Task Force Central battalions have sustained heavy military action against remnants of the splintered IS affiliated militant groups, such as the ASG and BIFF, killing or capturing dozens of fighters, using combat aircraft, artillery and armoured vehicles in support of ground operations.⁷

Despite missteps and heavy-handed responses during its operations, the AFP enjoyed Mindanao residents' support for intensified military offensives against the militants.⁸ Moreover, despite President Duterte's well-intentioned attempts to strengthen the PNP and its role in internal security, the siege of Marawi and the subsequent hunt and clearing operations of militant leaders and the groups' safe-havens in the difficult terrains of jungles and marshlands in the country's deep South, the AFP remains the only capable security sector actor, enjoying government and popular support in taking the fight to the dedicated, well-trained and armed militants in southern Philippines.

INDONESIA

In Indonesia, the string of significant terrorism incidents of late such as the prison riot in the police headquarters in West Java, and the series of suicide bombings against three churches in the East Java (Surabaya) in May 2018 garnered criticism against the Indonesian National Police (POLRI) as being inept in preventing acts of terrorism in the country.⁹ Conservative

forces, including the Indonesian military (TNI), began calling for a greater role for the military in counter-terrorism. According to the Indonesian 2003 Anti-Terrorism Law, the military has only a supportive, or subordinate, role to the national police. The first Islamic State-related attack in Indonesia, the bombing on a Starbucks cafe in Jakarta, provided a new trigger for the House of Representatives to consider the role of the TNI in counter-terrorism. However, the legislative moved ahead only at snail's pace due to strong opposition from human rights groups to any bigger involvement of the military. However, after the series of IS attacks in May 2018—and President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo's ultimatum to use his Presidential powers to force the necessary amendments forward,¹⁰ the Indonesian legislature adopted a stronger anti-terrorism legislation in June 2018, spelling out the military's role in preventing and countering terrorism in the country and overall, gave national security services stronger pre-emptive powers.¹¹

Further exemplifying the growing role of the TNI in counter-terrorism was Jokowi's consent to re-establish the previously suspended military Joint Operations Command, or Koopsusgab, tasked with counter-terrorism.¹² The Koopsusgab, a special unit including personnel from the three services special operations forces—the Army's Kopassus, the Navy's Denjaka, and the Air Force's Bravo-90—is on standby for rapid mobilization against emerging terror threats. The unit's role is to assist the national police, and its deployment is decided by the chief of the POLRI. The team's role and its autonomy, however, are subject to further revisions if deemed necessary due to the high level of terrorism threat in the country.

The Indonesian military had lost much of its role in fighting internal security threats following the end of the three-decade long rule of President Suharto and the dissolution of *dwifungsi*, or the military's dual role in society. As a result, law-enforcement agencies, namely the Indonesian National Police, gained the sole responsibility as the guarantor of internal security, leaving external security—deterrence and defence—to the TNI. Since the early 2000s, the TNI has been trying to regain some of its formerly pervasive influence in domestic affairs.

The TNI's embedded position within Indonesian society down to the village level, thanks to its persisting territorial command structure, gives it a natural advantage over the POLRI in communicating with locals and accessing information and intelligence on extremist or militant groups in the country. Moreover, the POLRI chief, Tito Karnavian, has made clear that the TNI's assistance in counter-terrorism operations is welcomed, especially in rough terrains like mountainous regions and jungles, given its guerrilla warfare expertise and specialized equipment and tactics.¹³ Curiously, according to a survey conducted by Kompas, some 92 percent of respondents supported TNI's bigger role. However, in the wake of the strong stance taken by human rights groups and the Minister of Law and Human Rights, Yasonna Laoly, 23.7 percent of respondents voiced their concern on possible human rights abuses should the military take on counter-terrorism operations.¹⁴

The growing role of the armed forces in counter-terrorism operations, the new level of threat posed by the IS in the country, and louder voices in favour of a more independent role of TNI

in countering terrorism may well lead to further gains on the part of the military in getting involved in internal security in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The siege of Marawi has opened the eyes of regional leaders to the scale and scope of the IS threat. This has elevated the role of the armed forces as a national security actor. The military has provided the heavy-lifting and supported the law-enforcement agencies in combating terrorism in specific local security environments.

In the Philippines, a country, which suffers perhaps the most complex internal security environment in Southeast Asia, the main responsibility of counter-insurgency operations and counter-terrorism missions has fallen to the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Despite the Philippine government's attempts to curtail the military's role in internal affairs by entrusting counter-terrorism to law-enforcement agencies, since 2010, the AFP's role has proved to be indispensable. The scale of the battle of Marawi in the country's deep South served only to gain lost ground for the army as the only security service able to cope with terrorist threats in the Philippines.

In Indonesia, the democratization of the country had seen the role of the Indonesian military in internal affairs weaken, in relative terms. The POLRI and its special operations unit, especially the Densus 88, had been relatively successful in countering terrorism in the country. However, with the new level of threat posed by the IS in Indonesia and Islamic State-related attacks since 2016, voices calling for the involvement of the TNI in counter-terrorism operations have grown in volume, and the TNI has been given a more active role in combating terrorism. Though supported by the majority of the population, the military's growing role in national security has also raised old ghosts of TNI's human rights abuses and legal impunity.

¹ See, Farouk Amaz, "Indonesian Police Fifth Most Corrupt institution in the Country: Transparency International, *Jakarta Globe*, 10 March 2015. <http://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesian-police-fifth-corrupt-institution-country-transparency-international/> (Accessed 31/07/2018).

² Trinna Leong, "Malaysia Creates Anti-Terror Force for Quick Response", in the *Straits Times*, on 28 October 2016. <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/malaysia-creates-anti-terror-force-for-quick-response>

³ Scott N. McKay & David A. Webb, "Comparing Counterterrorism in Indonesia and the Philippines", *CTC Sentinel*, February 2015, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 18-21.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ The AFP has, too, attracted its fair share of criticism on corruption and disinterest to contribute to the ending of the conflicts in the country's South. See, Zachary Abuza, "Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines? A Hard Look at a 'Success' Story", *War on the Rocks*, 14 June 2018.

<https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/where-did-the-u-s-go-wrong-in-the-philippines-a-hard-look-at-a-success-story/> (Accessed 31/07/2018)

⁶ See, for instance, Zachary Abuza, “Where Did the U.S. Go Wrong in the Philippines? A Hard Look at a ‘Success’ Story”.

⁷ Jeffrey Maitem & Mark Navales, “Philippine Forces Kill Around 2 Dozen Rebels in Clashes: Military Officials”, *BenarNews*, 28 December 2017.

<https://www.benarnews.org/english/news/philippine/biff-militants-killed-12282017121519.html> (Accessed 31/07/2018)

⁸ Jasminder Singh, “Post-Marawi Fallout: Further Radicalisation?”, *RSIS Commentary*, No. 035—2 March 2018.

⁹ See, “Indonesian President Joko Could Call in Military in Wake of Surabaya Bombings”, *ABC News*, 15 May 2018. <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-15/indonesian-military-to-assist-in-terrorist-cases/9761546> (Accessed 31/07/2018); and Emirza Adi Syailendra, “Shifting Sands: POLRI—TNI Ties in Counterterrorism”, *RSIS Commentary*, No. 087—25 May 2018.

¹⁰ Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, “Jokowi Vows to Push Through Tougher Anti-Terror Laws”, *The Straits Times*, 15 May 2018. <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/jokowi-vows-to-push-through-tougher-anti-terror-laws> (Accessed 31/07/2018)

¹¹ See, Emirza Adi Syailendra, “Shifting Sands: POLRI—TNI Ties in Counterterrorism”.

¹² Marguerite Afra Sapire & Nurul Fitri Ramadhani, “Indonesian Military Expected to Play Greater Role in Counterterrorism”, *Jakarta Post*, 17 May 2018.

<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2018/05/17/indonesian-military-expected-to-play-greater-role-in-counterterrorism.html> (Accessed 31/07/2018)

¹³ See, Emirza Adi Syailendra, “Shifting Sands: POLRI—TNI Ties in Counterterrorism”; and, Jasminder Singh, “Operation Tinombala: Indonesia’s New Counter-Terrorism Strategy”, *RSIS Commentary*, No. 251—07 October 2016.

¹⁴ Chaula Anindya, “TNI’s Role in Counterterrorism: Impact on Military Reform”, *RSIS Commentary*, No. 224—24 November 2017.

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