

## **The Socio-political Role of the Indonesian Armed Forces\***

SOERATMIN

### **Introduction**

I am deeply grateful for this rare opportunity to share with you my views on the historiographical problems of the socio-political role of the Indonesian armed forces.

What I want to outline to you today is an overview of Indonesian armed forces and their role in the socio-political affairs of the state, beginning with a brief explanation of what are the characteristics of the Indonesian armed forces, why they feel the need to shape socio-political development and, lastly, the problems of their involvement in the socio-political processes itself. I will do this, first, by looking briefly at the establishment of the Indonesian armed forces. This understanding is fundamental to properly observe the essences of the Indonesian armed forces dual functions of national defense and security, and socio-political development. Secondly, I will outline the actualization of this position; and thirdly, I will address how this position has come under strong criticisms (most heavily) since the resignation of President Suharto.

### **Characteristics of the Indonesian Armed Forces**

The Indonesian armed forces was not created by a civilian leadership, rather it originated from the grassroots people. They first emerged as freedom fighters, and later became Indonesian armed forces. They fought for independence against the Dutch colonialism in order to materialize the ideals of their nation. The Indonesian armed forces, unable to match the Dutch in conventional warfare, resorted to guerilla tactics based on close cooperation with the people.

These experiences during the revolution shaped its subsequent development in several aspects. First, there is no clear division between political and military tasks. This is clearly shown when the civilian government collapsed during the height of struggle against the Dutch

\*This paper by Indonesian Ambassador to the Philippines Soeratmin was delivered during the lecture series conducted by Dr. Bambang Purwanto on "Seminar Series on Indonesian History, Politics and Society," organized by the Third World Studies Center on February 20-23, 2001.

when the latter attempted to reinstate its colonial authority in Indonesia. Although the struggle for independence was in fact politically motivated, when the civilian Indonesian leaders (Soekarno and Hatta) were imprisoned by the Dutch in December 1948, de facto leadership on the revolution was taken up by the armed forces under General Sudirman.

Second, the experience influenced the armed forces' strategic thinking on how they could defend the nation against any threat. This strategic thinking that gives the Indonesian armed forces a unique character is best described in their *Sishankamrata* or Total People's Defense. This concept suggests that the Indonesian national security can only be maintained through a solid relationship between the armed forces and the people. It calls on the Indonesian people to spontaneously rise up against any threat to the independence and sovereignty of the nation and fight with the armed forces to overcome that threat. The army and the people are partners for the defense of the nation. The army is the armed core and the people are the foundation.

### **The Essence of the Dual Functions**

Based on the earlier interaction during the Indonesian revolution, the relationship between the Indonesian armed forces, the state and the society was established. The armed forces is not merely the state armed forces whose members stay in their barracks, but it is also a socio-political power that has the right to play roles in various public undertakings.

This multifaceted functions of the Indonesian armed forces was officially introduced for the first time by the Indonesian Army Chief of Staff, General A. H. Nasution on November 11, 1958 when he formulated the theory of the "middle course." According to General Nasution, Indonesian Army should not follow the western model of an army as a mere instrument in the hands of the government, nor should it seize power and assume military dictatorship as has been demonstrated in Latin America. Instead the Indonesian armed forces should opt for a middle road, that is, Indonesian armed forces is equated with any other socio-political forces.

In the period of liberalist democracy, that is, the period of 1950 to 1959, attempts were made to get rid of the identity of the armed forces as fighters in the struggle. However, this effort failed because the civilian

domination in the government administration created unending political instability. The cabinet kept collapsing all the time, economic situation was in disarray, while regional uprisings eventually created regional upheavals that undermined national cohesion and unity, and the safety of the nation.

Following the re-institution of the 1945 Constitution, that is, in the period of 1959 to 1965, the armed forces obtained recognition from the government as a functional group, on the basis of various legislative regulations that were in force. In the meantime, however, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) was slowly building up its influence. Members of the PKI infiltrated the government, including the Indonesian armed forces community. When they thought they have enough power, they launched an aborted coup d'etat in the September 30, 1965 movement.

Since the inception of President Suharto's new order, the armed forces, through its socio-political role, had taken active part and played a role in the national decision-making process in order to safeguard and put into practice Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution.

The essences of the dual functions of the Indonesian Armed forces are the spirit of service of the armed forces to take up, together with the other social forces, the duties and responsibilities of the struggle of the Indonesian nation, both in the field of defense and security of the state and also in the field of development of the nation's welfare in an effort to achieve the national goals.

The targets of the armed forces as a socio-political force are indicated as follows. In the political field, firstly, the creation of a durable and dynamic national stability to support the success of national development and the maintenance of national resilience. Secondly, the realization of a high level of national consciousness in the context of promoting the growth of a way of life conforming with Pancasila democracy. Thirdly, the building of an increasingly strong national cohesion and unity, the foundations of which are the comprehension and practical application of Pancasila.

In social and cultural field, firstly, the creation of harmony among religious communities and the disappearance of conflicts among ethnic

and religious groups, and races; and secondly, the forming of national discipline in the community.

### Excessive Application of the Dual Functions

The main problems associated with the application of dual functions by the Indonesian armed forces were seen mostly during the era of New Order. These problems, I would say stemmed from the fact that armed forces personnel have had misinterpreted their socio-political role, and thereby overexerted the implementation. The first mistake was related to the implementation of what is known as *kekaryaan* or seconding military personnel to civilian assignment, and the second, their failure to maintain their neutrality in carrying out their role in political development.

The seconding of military personnel to civilian posts (*kekaryaan*) originated during the breakdown of parliamentary democracy in the late 1950s. The declaration of martial law in early 1957 allowed military personnel to adopt an increasingly prominent role in regional and local administrations. In late 1957, as part of the struggle to "liberate" West Irian, Dutch-owned enterprises were nationalized and turned over to the military for management. The *kekaryaan* was mostly driven by factors internal to the armed forces itself. During the 1950s the military elite faced the challenge of transforming a large, poorly trained guerilla force into a modern, standing army. Among the difficulties involved was the demobilization of personnel deemed to be superfluous or who lacked professional military training. The natural and obvious solution would have been to reorganize the army structure and discharge excess troops. The prospect of mass dismissals stipulated concern within the officers corps about employment, and raised the specter of unrest within the military. It is within this context that the declaration of martial law and the seizure of Dutch-owned enterprises in 1957 were welcomed by *Angkatan Bersenjata Republik Indonesia* (ABRI or the Indonesian Armed Forces) as a partial solution to non-military duties, with administrative and economic opportunities providing employment and some compensation for shortened military careers and frustrated ambitions.

The Indonesian armed forces' early inroads into the political and economic realms were greatly expanded following the inception of the New Order in the aftermath of the aborted coup by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). The New Order administration replaced officials

contaminated by association with the PKI. The dismissal of local administrative heads and bureaucratic reorganization created a political and personnel vacuum into which military personnel (most still on active duty, some retired) stepped in.

Over time, this practice of *kekaryaan* became deeply entrenched. In the beginning, it was merely intended to solve the ongoing problem of transforming a large guerrilla force into a standing army characterized by hierarchical divisions, it eventually became a kind of continuing program of placing military personnel in civilian postings justified by the notion to maintain and safeguard the state ideology of Pancasila.

Another problem of the socio-political role of the Indonesian army was the failure of military personnel to be impartial in carrying out this secondary role. This failure of neutrality was highlighted by the fact that no member of military may join any political party other than Golkar. Supposedly, they stayed "above all groups" and "close to the people" regardless of their socio-political background. Furthermore, as the military regards the only serious threat to the nation to be from internal extremist group, they controlled the pace of development and political opposition by executing their socio-political role. However, as many cases have shown, the President (Suharto), acting as the supreme commander of all Indonesian armed forces, can discriminately select anyone or any idea which might constitute a threat, not necessarily to the state, but rather to his position or to members of his elite groups. As a result, many ordinary Indonesians were finding it difficult to maintain their faith in the Indonesian armed forces as an instrument of the state, seeing it rather as no more than a political tool of the President (Suharto) or the ruling elite of Golkar.

### Conclusion

Responding to the strong challenges against the dual functions of the armed forces according to which Indonesian armed forces does not perform purely military function, but is also a socio-political force with the right to actively participate in government, the self reformed Indonesian armed forces has produced a new approach called the "New Paradigm" which envisages a reduction of its legitimate political role. Now, the military has retained only 38 seats (used to be 100) in the House of Representatives. And as of April 1999, the practice of *kekaryaan* has also

been eliminated. Military personnel are still allowed to hold their posts in the civilian bureaucracy, local legislatures, and as regional executives, but they would have to retire from active duty. These moves marked a partial retreat of the socio-political role of the Indonesian armed forces.

The People's Consultative Assembly in their 2000 annual convention finally took the following measures in their decrees No. 6 and No. 7, which marked a complete retreat of the Indonesian armed forces from its socio-political role:

1. The Indonesian armed forces and the Indonesian state police as institutions shall be separated in accordance with their respective roles and functions. The military shall be the instrument in the state's defense, and the police shall be the element of the state's apparatus in maintaining security. As the State Defense Instrument, the military shall have the main task of upholding the nation's sovereignty, the territorial integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution; as well as to protect the whole nation and the entire native land of Indonesia from threats and disturbances towards the unity of the nation and the state. In the case of defending the nation, the military and the police should cooperate and help each other.

2. The commander of the Indonesian armed forces and the state police shall be appointed and dismissed by the President only after getting the approval of the House of Representatives.

3. The military shall take a neutral stand in political life and shall not be involved in political activities. The Indonesian armed forces shall support the existence of democracy, as well as uphold the law and human rights. They shall exercise neither the right to vote, nor to be elected. Their participation in determining the direction of national policy shall be channeled through the People's Consultative Assembly until 2009 at the latest.

4. The members of the Indonesian armed forces shall only occupy civilian positions after they resign or retire from the military service. ❁