

Military postings are now less political

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FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

AWAY from the glare of the headlines, a fundamental shift has quietly taken place in the Indonesian military (TNI).

In the last three months, there have been at least four waves of personnel changes. The first, on Oct 23, involved 46 officers. Another reshuffle on Nov 17 involved 11 officers; on Nov 30, 72 officers; and Dec 29, 51 officers.

The transfers affected a wide range of commands and brought about changes in posts across the board, including those of the three service chiefs, the chief of general staff, the chief of military intelligence, the commander of army special forces (Kopassus), and the regional commanders of Papua, Sulawesi, Aceh, West Java and Central Java, to name a few.

The changes arise from trends in the TNI's personnel system over the past five years, sparked initially by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's election in 2004; the new TNI Law of 2004, which raised the military retirement age from 55 to 58; and the end of the Aceh insurgency in 2005.

A 2008 study by the editors of Cornell University's Indonesia journal showed that between September 2005 and March 2008, there were at least three big waves of personnel moves in which President Yudhoyono and then-army chief Djoko Santoso slotted their classmates from the 1974 and 1975 classes of the Indonesian Military Academy into strategic posts.

The decision to favour these two classes could be seen as a way to relieve their frustration: Though the classes were large (the class of 1974 had 434 members and 1975, 304), the number of strategic posts had shrunk.

The end of the Aceh insurgency in 2005, as well as the abolishment of many socio-political posts after former leader Suharto's fall, did not make things easier. Logjams in promotions began to appear.

The Cornell Indonesia journal study argues that it was the need to provide new posts that prompted the greater use of postings to the defence and non-military ministries as well as the expansion of the territorial command structure in the last few years.

The shortage of posts also explains the frequency of personnel reshuffles in the last few months, so officers can be cycled

through posts more rapidly. Younger officers from the classes of 1976 to 1980 have been moved into many key positions in the recent reshuffles.

From the class of 1976, we have generals George Toisutta (army chief) and Suryo Prabowo (deputy army chief). From the class of 1977, there are generals Hotma Marbun (Papua commander) and Hotmangaradja Pandjaitan (Bali commander).

The class of 1978 is represented by generals Soenarko (infantry centre commander), Hari Krisnomo (Sulawesi regional commander), Gerhan Lentara (commander of 2nd Division of the Army Strategic Reserve), Budiman (Central Java regional commander) and Marciano Norman (presidential guard commander).

The first officer from the 1980s generation to win a general's star is Pramono Edhie Wibowo (class of 1980), Dr Yudhoyono's brother-in-law who was recently appointed the West Java commander after his tenure in Kopassus. The new Kopassus chief Lodewijk Freidrich Paulus is from the class of 1981. Many from the classes of 1980 and 1981 fill the sub-regional military commander posts.

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1976-1981 classes, which averaged around 100 officers per class, their members are likely to feel more secure about their careers than their seniors. They realise that as long as they do their jobs well, strategic posts are within their grasp.

In another change from the Suharto era, when intelligence officers were favoured, the Strategic Reserve Command (Kostrad) and Kopassus have become the most prestigious postings. It is interesting to note that Dr Yudhoyono, TNI commander Djoko Santoso, army chief

George Toisutta, as well as his predecessor Agustadi Sasongko, all served in Kostrad.

Officers from the navy and air force – two services known for technically oriented professionalism – are also playing a growing role. Rear-Admiral Tedjo Edhy Purdijanto was appointed the TNI's chief of general staff in 2007. Indeed, from 2006-2007, the number of non-army generals in strategic inter-service positions has risen dramatically.

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If this trend continues, the younger generation of officers may be more inclined to prove themselves professionally. They may even seek new areas, such as counter-terrorism and border security, where they can shine.

Though personnel management may stabilise in the next few years as the 1976-1981 classes take charge, the fact that subsequent classes, from 1983 to 1991, are larger, averaging around 250 officers per year, means that post availability and promotion policies will remain a potential time bomb.

In the absence of a complete overhaul of the military's personnel planning system, the road to a stable form of renewal appears a long and winding one.

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