

# To vote or not to vote, that is not the question

Opinion is divided as to when and how the Indonesian military should be allowed to vote again

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Among the basic rights of any citizen, soldiers included, is the right to vote. But this has not been the case for members of the Indonesian military (TNI), who last exercised this right in the country's first general elections in 1955.

In fact, since 1971, soldiers had been barred from voting. In return, the TNI was given fixed seats in the national and local parliaments, although the practice was discontinued after 2004.

The "national consensus" back then was that historically, political bickering had ruined the military's internal cohesion and had even led the country to the brink of civil war. Hence, to prevent politicians from meddling in the military to score electoral points, the military's voting rights were "suspended".

Recently, however, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono tried to reverse this long-standing practice when he announced that the military should not be deprived of the right to vote and suggested that the TNI could vote in the 2014



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general elections if its members were ready to do so.

Previously, TNI Chief General Djoko Santoso had also said that there was ongoing research within the military to assess whether or not – and to what extent – the soldiers

were ready to vote.

His remarks sparked a controversy as some still believe that the TNI's internal cohesion remains shaky while its political inclination has yet to fully disappear – which might lead to conflicts on the ground if the plan to allow soldiers to resume voting was hastily implemented. This is especially since the research had been conducted internally without public scrutiny. Others also argue that Indonesia's democracy is not "mature enough" yet.

But there are those who believe that the TNI's professionalism and political neutrality have been "well-tested" in the last three post-Suharto elections and therefore its members should be allowed to vote in 2014.

Of course, the military's well-established territorial network down to the village level that makes the TNI an attractive power base should not be forgotten as well.

This is especially since the implementation of regional autonomy in 2001, which hands political and financial power to the regions, making control of the local dynamics an imperative for any political party.

That said, the only way the military could legally vote is by incorporating the stipulation in the current parliamentary discussion to revise Law No 10 on the election of parliamentarians and senators – a political process that may not always have the TNI's best long-term interests in mind.

This is why previously, the TNI headquarters took upon itself to decide whether or not its soldiers should exercise their voting rights – as the military had done when it refused the civilians' "support" to restore the soldiers' voting rights in 2002 and 2006 on the grounds that the "boys weren't ready".

This was confirmed by an internal survey of 12 regional military commands in 2006 which showed that 60 per cent of the soldiers did not wish to vote in the general elections last year.

Apparently, the military's top brass still believe that civilian political bickering could spill over into the TNI and disrupt institutional cohesion – which has been painstakingly restored since the disastrous split of 1998.

As such, there just was not enough reason then for the TNI to put itself in the political spotlight yet again while risking losing both hard-won public support and institutional unity.

Today, the problem is not whether the military should be allowed to vote – they have the fundamental right to do so as citizens – but it is about when and under what conditions.

The fact that the politicians are trying to win favour with the military amid numerous regional elections and that a new leadership has emerged within all the major political parties – all of whom are gearing up for a post-Yudhoyono era – suggest that the timing of

the discourse to restore the TNI's voting rights could be politically-motivated.

Needless to say, such moves risk unravelling the progress made in military reforms over the past decade, especially when one considers that regulations are either not in place or could not be strongly enforced to prevent soldiers from being utilised as vote-getters.

Also, by allowing the TNI to take its own initiative to decide whether, in what manner, and when the soldiers' voting rights should be restored, the President is undermining one of the central tenets of democratic civil-military relations – that the government decides on policy, not the military.

The public, both through parliament and civil-society groups, needs to be involved as part of the research and debate to decide when and how the TNI could vote again.

Ultimately, the TNI must remember that among the chief reasons why its public standing has improved remarkably in the past decade is its willingness to maintain institutional political neutrality and listen to what the public has to say.

To reverse this, and to do so behind closed curtains, is the equivalent to taking one step forward and a few steps backward.

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