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Indonesian Presidential Election 2019

Old Soldiers Never Die: Retired Officers Behind Jokowi, Prabowo

By Keoni Marzuki

SYNOPSIS

Several retired senior military officers have declared their support for either incumbent President Joko Widodo or his challenger Prabowo Subianto in the upcoming April 2019 presidential election. How will support of these military officers impact the race?

COMMENTARY

IN AUGUST 2017, several recently retired senior military officers pledged their support for President Joko Widodo ('Jokowi') in his quest for re-election. These officers formed a volunteer advocacy group, consisting of retired senior military officers and notable civilian figures called Cakra 19, which is currently chaired by Andi Widjajanto, Jokowi's former Cabinet Secretary.

Meanwhile, Bravo 5 – another pro-Jokowi volunteer group consisting of several influential retired senior military officers of the 1970s batch was recently reactivated after previously supporting Jokowi's successful 2014 campaign. Although independent of one another, both groups have ties to Luhut Pandjaitan, the Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and a close Jokowi ally and fixer. Several retired high-ranking officers such as former commander-in-chief Moeldoko are also serving in official capacities on Jokowi's campaign team. Jokowi's challenger, Prabowo Subianto, boasts equally extensive military support, having several high-ranking retired officers, such as Djoko Santoso, Moekhlas Sidik, Yunus Yosfiah, Judi Magjo Yusuf and Tedjo Edhy Purdijanto.

Retired Officers As Critical Assets

Retired military officers provide essential assets for both Jokowi and Prabowo. Senior Indonesian military officers typically held posts at local military commands and/or local military bases at the early stage of their military career. This tour of duty allows them, over time, to cultivate relations with prominent individuals who hold considerable political influence at the grassroots/regional level.

Their connections and networks to local politicians and levers of power could be very useful in turning out voters or securing high-profile endorsements from influential local figures, as well as obtain critical information that can be used to shape campaign strategy. While this does not automatically guarantee they can deliver big turn-out or support for their preferred candidate, it gives them a lot of potential influence in securing grass-roots support in competitive districts for the candidate they are backing.

The other critical contribution retired military officers can offer is financial. After leaving the military, many high-ranking officers go into the private sector, particularly the lucrative resource extraction industries – such as mining and energy – which allows them to accumulate wealth and cultivate large networks of wealthy business partners and associates.

Campaigning for public office in Indonesia is becoming an increasingly expensive undertaking. The Indonesian Ministry of Home Affairs estimated that mayoral/regent candidates spend from 20-100 billion rupiahs (around US\$1.5–US\$7 million) to fund their entire campaign. Wealthy former military officers can help offset these costs, either directly or by bringing other well-heeled patrons.

Enduring Personal Ties to Military

Apart from political networks and financial contribution, their personal linkages to the military and the modicum of influence they retained among junior officers or the rank-and-file are other assets that could benefit the presidential candidates. These linkages could be leveraged to solicit support from their associates in the military by, for instance, mobilising the military's assets. These include the military intelligence network and the territorial command structure to help influence the election in the direction of their preferred candidate.

Mobilisation of military personnel to influence the course of an election is not unheard of. In the 2016 Riau Islands gubernatorial election, for example, there were strong indications and numerous reports that suggested the mobilisation of some quarters of the Indonesian military to undermine PDIP-backed candidate.

Such support, if it occurs, is likely to be transactional. In return for leveraging their position within the military (TNI) to mobilise support in favour of one or another candidate, current TNI officers could receive benefits from their retired patrons.

These range from preferential treatment concerning postings, expedited promotions, monetary benefits or access to post-retirement business opportunities – should the candidate they are backing win the election. Rather than benefitting the TNI as an institution, these kinds of reciprocal benefits are limited to individuals.

Strict Limits on Active Duty Officers

For active duty military personnel, abusing their TNI authority to influence elections carries a considerable amount of risk. Military personnel are professionally and legally prohibited from being involved in political campaigns, including any actions that would influence voters to cast a ballot for certain candidates.

Moreover, the TNI Commander, Air Chief Marshall Hadi Tjahjanto, has repeatedly stressed that military personnel should remain impartial in the electoral process. Violating the regulations and the Commander's directive may jeopardise their career.

If the TNI were to overtly favour one candidate over the other it would undermine its credibility as one of Indonesia's most trusted public institutions, a reputation that the TNI has painstakingly rebuilt in the two decades since *Reformasi*. In post-Suharto Indonesia, with an active civil society and media, the TNI has been under closer scrutiny for impropriety than in the past.

This was evident when complaints were lodged against village non-commissioned officers (*Babinsa*) who were thought to be improperly influencing Jakarta voters during the 2014 election. While ultimately determined to be a misunderstanding, the case illustrates the heightened public awareness towards any election-related misconduct on the part of military officers.

They Don't Simply Fade Away

There is nothing wrong with high-ranking retired military officers expressing their support for a presidential candidate or being involved in political activities as they are now technically civilians and enjoy the rights to associate and participate in the democratic process afforded to any other civilian. However, there is still a question about why so many of them are so active in politics after leaving the military.

Personal motivations – whether duty to one's country, desire to acquire more power from public offices, or aspirations for political office or even to fill up their spare time – is one possible element that drives the trend. Ongoing [research](#) suggests that the trend is a legacy of the New Order, when the officer corps maintained a very personal relationship with the highest levels of government, and that generation of officers remain active politically even years after they have left the military.

Given the current trend coinciding with the Jokowi presidency, we could also make the argument that they may continue to play a role in Indonesian politics partly because politicians realise these retired power players are still very influential and seek to co-opt them to gain the upper hand over their rivals.

On the other hand, the same benefits these retired officers offer also present them with the opportunity to pursue their political interests actively. Old soldiers never die, and in the case of Indonesia, they rarely ever fade away either.

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