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The New TNI Professionalism of Defence and Welfare in Prabowo's Free Nutritious Meal Programme

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SYNOPSIS

Leonard C. Sebastian and Dilla Andieni Nurshadrina explore the broader context of Indonesia's defence doctrine to understand the motivations behind the Indonesian military's growing role beyond the defence domain. Rather than an overreach, this shift may represent a new professionalism for the military

COMMENTARY

In January, the new Prabowo–Gibran administration moved with unprecedented speed to implement the centrepiece of their election campaign, namely, a [US\\$4.3 billion free meal programme](#) to combat stunted growth among children due to malnutrition.

The Free Nutritious Meal (Makan Bergizi Gratis, MBG) programme is now into the third month of its implementation. The Indonesian public is closely monitoring whether this key initiative, which played a significant role in securing Prabowo–Gibran's electoral victory, will be successfully executed.

Positioned as an investment in "2045 *Indonesia Emas*" — the vision of being a sovereign and fair nation as well as becoming the fifth-largest economy in the world by the country's centenary — MBG has garnered both support and controversy. While [many](#) emphasise the importance of the programme in ensuring access to nutritious food nationwide, [others](#) raise concerns about its implementation and budgetary sustainability.

The MBG is coordinated by the newly established [National Nutrition Agency](#) (Badan Gizi Nasional, BGN). BGN is tasked with managing this collaborative, multi-ministerial programme under the supervision of the Coordinating Ministry for Human

Development and Culture (Kemenko PMK) and the Coordinating Ministry for Food (Kemenko Pangan). President Prabowo Subianto has ensured that the MBG is a priority programme in his administration.

In the first month of its implementation, Prabowo announced that [650,000](#) schoolchildren across 31 provinces had already received meals under the MBG initiative since its launch on 6 January 2025. He expressed hopes for the MBG's gradual expansion, targeting 15 million recipients by September 2025 and aiming for all Indonesian children to benefit by the end of the year.

Public reactions have been mixed. Some primary school children reportedly disliked the menu, while middle and high school students expressed satisfaction, with many sharing TikTok videos thanking President Prabowo. However, observers have raised [concerns](#) about the MBG's funding, noting that a portion of the initial budget reportedly came from Prabowo's personal funds.

Budgetary issues aside, Indonesia's vast geography poses a significant challenge to the MBG's implementation. The sheer number of schools, the diversity of islands, and the remoteness of some locations make distribution a complex task. In some mountainous areas, such as those in Central Papua, schools can only be reached by special vehicles or helicopters.



Indonesia's Free Nutritious Meal programme was launched on 6 January 2025, with logistical support from the Indonesian armed forces. *Image source: [BPMI Setpres/Kris](#).*

TNI's Role to Support MBG Implementation

Recognising these challenges, Prabowo sees the Indonesian armed forces (TNI) as the solution, positioning them as a cornerstone of the MBG's logistics and implementation. With vast manpower, an exceptionally efficient chain of command, a fleet of vehicles capable of navigating Indonesia's challenging terrain, and an extensive network of military district commands (Kodim) in every municipality and regency, the TNI possesses an infrastructure uniquely suited for coordinating the supply and distribution of the MBG.

During the [MBG's first week](#), 351 Kodims, 14 naval bases (Lantamal), and 41 air bases (Lanud) were actively involved. In [remote regions](#) like Sugapa in Intan Jaya, Central Papua, the Ministry of Defence, through Komando Gabungan Wilayah Pertahanan

(Kogabwilhan) III — one of three joint regional defence commands — delivered 1,000 meal packages by helicopter.

This collaboration may appear pragmatic, but the TNI seems to be the only institution capable of sustaining Prabowo–Gibran’s ambitious MBG initiative. Beyond its advantages in strategic communication and logistical capabilities, the TNI is inherently designed to execute nationwide initiatives, thanks to its extensive territorial reach. Programmes like MBG align seamlessly with the TNI’s territorial development doctrine, which emphasises civilian assistance to bolster territorial defence.

While traditionally tasked with defending sovereignty and protecting borders, the TNI’s role has evolved to encompass diverse contributions to national priorities, including public welfare initiatives such as MBG. This “new professionalism” within the TNI — leveraging defence strategies not only to safeguard the nation but also to improve the well-being of Indonesians — contrasts with the traditional definition of professionalism promulgated by Western militaries, with its primary focus on external defence. The *Kemanunggalan* (oneness) ethos, i.e., the unity of the military and the people, and *Sishankamrata*, a holistic approach to defence that mobilises all citizens, territories, and resources to safeguard sovereignty and security, remain at the core of TNI’s thinking, which is key to understanding why the TNI is uniquely positioned as a critical actor in supporting the MBG.

A “Total” People’s Defence System

Traditionally, the TNI’s primary mandate has been to defend the nation, guided by its dual doctrines: territorial development (*Doktrin Pembinaan Territorial*) and warfare (*Doktrin Perang Wilayah*). Conversely, it is not new that the TNI has been involved in non-combat initiatives, such as *ABRI Masuk Desa* (ABRI Goes to the Village, AMD), later rebranded as *TNI Manunggal Membangun Desa* (TMMMD). These initiatives aimed to promote rural development, focusing on villages that were both at the heart of Indonesia’s population and critical to national defence, particularly villages in border regions. AMD and TMMMD can be understood as forms of *Operasi Bhakti*, which emphasise the military’s devotion to serving the people. The term *Bhakti* itself in Bahasa Indonesia means devotion or service. [Bhakti TNI](#) refers to the involvement of the TNI in supporting civilian activities to address social or humanitarian issues.

Through *Operasi Bhakti*, the TNI aimed to rebuild trust and demonstrate its role as a protector and servant of the nation. *Operasi Bhakti* embodies “*kemanunggalan TNI dengan rakyat*”, signifying the unity between the military and the people.

Operasi Bhakti also refers to one of the methods of territorial development (*Binter*), which serves to empower defence areas. This concept is rooted in the aforementioned *Sishankamrata* or Total People’s Defence and Security System. It evolved during Indonesia’s struggle for independence and was later embedded in the second amendment of the 1945 [Constitution](#).

Under this system, the TNI’s territorial command structure (*Kodam*) provides a strategic advantage for implementing large-scale, nationwide programmes like MBG. These programmes not only reinforce the military’s logistical and operational capacity

but also strengthen its relationships with local communities, ensuring that the TNI remains deeply connected to the people it serves.

MBG as *Operasi Bhakti*

In its first week, the MBG saw the TNI take centre stage, assuming critical [roles](#) mainly in security, distribution, and the operations of the Nutrition Fulfilment Service Units (*Satuan Pelayanan Pemenuhan Gizi*, SPPG).

The TNI's role in MBG offers a fresh lens on its enduring tradition of engaging in civilian welfare. While MBG's immediate focus is on combating malnutrition and stunting among children and the provision of nutrition for pregnant women, it serves as *Operasi Bhakti*, a cornerstone of the TNI's territorial and social development strategy.

As a nationwide initiative, MBG goes beyond public health; it is an investment in Indonesia's future. Tackling malnutrition today builds a healthier, more productive generation tomorrow. It is an effort crucial for achieving Indonesia's demographic goals by 2045. Indonesia is projected to experience a demographic bonus between 2030 and 2040, when the size of the population of productive age (15–64 years) will be higher than that of the non-productive age (65 years and older) and will account for more than 60 per cent of the total population.

The MBG also strengthens the *Kemanunggalan* ethos, particularly in its outreach to schoolchildren. While the TNI has its own outreach programmes, such as school visits, MBG serves as a complementary effort to strengthen these initiatives. Building trust and familiarity with the next generation is essential for maintaining *Sishankamrata*.

[Critics](#) may point out that the TNI's participation in MBG lacks explicit legal or political mandates. This contention though is incorrect. Under Chapter 7, paragraph 2 of the 2004 TNI Law, *Sishankamrata* falls under the auspices of *Operasi Militer Selain Perang* (Military Operations Other than War, OSMP). Military Operations Other than War, or MOOTW, is a concept that is increasingly applicable to militaries around the world, including the US military. Such operations include non-combat activities like humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

The TNI's unparalleled logistical capacity, organisational discipline, and presence in even the remotest areas make it uniquely suited for such large-scale initiatives. More importantly, MBG aligns seamlessly with the TNI's historical role in reinforcing *Sishankamrata*, a system designed to integrate the military and civilian [sectors](#) in safeguarding national interests.

The New Professionalism of Defence and Welfare

The MBG initiative allows us to better understand how the military doctrines of territorial development and territorial warfare declared in 1958 impact the TNI's attitudes to professionalism. This is not merely about projecting power; it is about broadening the concept of defence to encompass public welfare. Past initiatives like AMD and TMMD demonstrated the TNI's ability to act as a developmental force, but MBG takes this further. It demonstrates how the military's extensive "pocket" defence system can prepare the nation for both peacetime resilience and wartime unity.

TNI's professionalism is an ethos associated with *reformasi* norms, meaning that the military becomes less political in its activities. It retains a strong commitment to public service and welfare while emphasising predictable military procedures for the recruitment and promotion of officers; scheduled military unit training cycles; preparation in military academies of officers for future appointments; doctrines to guide how forces should be employed and structured; and the type of equipment to be procured to fulfil those tasks.

The role of the military in Indonesia has expanded far beyond traditional combat operations. It is no longer sufficient to narrowly define the military's purpose as solely defending territorial sovereignty. Instead, initiatives like MBG and the long-standing *Operasi Bhakti* demonstrate a broader dimension of military operations — one that encompasses welfare, development, and community engagement and protection.

The Indonesian public needs to be better informed of the role of the TNI. Given the evolving nature of TNI engagements, the time is ripe for the political leadership and the TNI to develop a formal framework to guide and legitimise these functions for the sake of more transparent civil–military relations.

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