



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

POST-SUHARTO INDONESIA: Can a military coup happen?

Evan A. Laksmana

19 November 2008

The argument that the Indonesian military could follow the coup path of the Thai military is unfounded, at least for the near future. The TNI has neither the norms, capacity, nor opportunity to do so. Any military political intervention however can be avoided by having a new balance between the officer corps, political leadership, and civilian defence community.

IN LATE AUGUST, the Indonesian press aired an age-old debate about the possibility of a military coup in Indonesia. The issue was sparked by President Yudhoyono's announcement of a 1.6 trillion rupiah (US\$ 1.6 billion) budget cut in defence spending next year.

Some observers have noted that a budget cut could hamper Indonesia's fledgling military reform as it slows down effort to create a minimum essential force. Others even went further by saying that if this trend continues, there is a possibility that the Indonesian military (TNI) could follow the coup path of the Thai military (*Kompas*, 25/08/08). Subsequently, Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono stated that a military coup is out of the question as the TNI are the 'people's army'. It was a sentiment shared by high-ranking military officers as they claim that any military coup was simply not in the TNI's lexicon.

However, given Indonesia's turbulent history and past conflictual relationship between the military and political leadership, the question of whether a military coup could and will happen is certainly worth looking into.

A military coup in the offing?

Let's look more closely at the argument that the recent budget cuts might lead to a military coup, supposedly as it threatens the military's financial corporate interests. This argument however overlooks other factors that could inhibit a military takeover. Theoretically, a military coup – or other forms of military intervention in politics – could occur if three factors are present. These are the supporting motives, the capacity of the officer corps, as well as the opportunity provided in the domestic political arena to do so.

Firstly, in terms of motive, a military's intention to launch a coup generally stems from two overlapping logics: the logic of rationality and the logic of appropriateness. In the former, the military might rationally intervene mainly to defend its 'corporate' interests. In the latter, military behaviour is measured in terms of the congruence with its internalized norms.

A coup might not be entirely acceptable to all members of the officer corps due to embedded and internalized norms within the corps which sees a military coup as unacceptable to the Indonesian people. This view stems from the TNI's ethos as the "people's army" and "guardian" of the people. Thus, any coup attempt might potentially shatter military cohesion and ruin its public image – two things that the military leadership has been trying to recover gradually and painstakingly in the post-Suharto period.

The military's corporate interests cannot be measured solely by the level of military spending. If so, a coup could have happened decades ago since from the 1950s, Jakarta was never able to provide the military with adequate funding. Moreover, it has generally been acknowledged that the bulk of the military's financial sources comes from off-budget sources, especially its commercial activities. Efforts are being made to regulate these activities.

Thus, although recent budget cuts might affect the TNI's operational readiness, it does not necessarily threaten the military's corporate interests. Also, there are other multi-faceted issues that the military sees to be more 'fundamental,' such as the promotion and appointment policies, the territorial command structure, or investigation into past human rights abuses.

Secondly, in terms of capacity, any coup attempt will be determined by the degree of cohesion among the officer corps, since a coup – essentially a showdown with the political leadership – requires a unified front to be effective and acceptable to the military leadership. In this regard, as scholars have argued, the TNI has been divided throughout its history, especially during President Suharto's last decade.

Takashi Shiraishi, a professor at Kyoto University, argued that during the New Order, Mr. Suharto took measures to ensure that the officer corps never developed into a unified front – a tactic of divide and rule that some attributed to President Abdurrahman Wahid as well. Hence, to some extent, the shadow of a divided military lingers on that could hinder a coup attempt.

Finally, in terms of opportunity, a coup move is usually preceded by a deep domestic political and economic crisis – often cited as reasons that 'propel' the military to intervene. Today however the TNI is in a cordial working partnership with the President, who himself is a retired general, and the domestic conditions are more stable than before. Thus, the opportunity, and justification, to launch a coup is almost non-existent today.

Therefore, even if one could contemplate a situation in which the military is 'forced' to contemplate a coup, its organizational norms, multi-faceted institutional interests, and the legacies of a divided military, might hinder such eventuality in the near future.

Need for new balance in civil-military relations

However, the historically turbulent, and often conflictual, relationship between the political and military leaderships indicates that the balance between the two is delicate, and often reflects a mutual distrust. Thus, to safeguard against future conflicts, a new balance is needed to preserve a working relationship in a post-Suharto democratic setting. In this regard, a civilian defence community could complement the existing balance between the political and military leaderships.

The triangular balance might create what scholars call a 'concordance' in civil-military relations where the government, officer corps, and civil society have a cooperative relationship stressing dialogue, accommodation, and shared values. This could be initiated through several steps.

First, the political leadership should reduce the suspicion and grievances among the officer corps by not politicizing the military and not interfering excessively into internal military affairs. Excessive politicization and interference in internal military affairs could, as it did before, factionalize the officer corps and deepen grievances.

Second, the military should maintain the trust extended by the political leadership by continuing the momentum of military reform, including the regulations of military commercial activities and military tribunals. Abrupt and outright rejection of reform efforts might increase mistrust among the political leadership.

Finally, the civilian defence community should bridge any differences between the political and military leaderships. This could be done for example by assisting both leaderships in formulating defence strategies, while at the same time providing checks and balances. The absence of a credible civilian defence community instead might hinder communication between the two leaderships which could bring back old feuds.

In the end, the urgency for such a balance perhaps could be seen in the warning made by Andi Widjajanto, a noted Indonesian military observer, that the TNI is currently ‘waiting in the wings’ and simply ‘observing’ the political arena – a situation which could change if domestic conditions deteriorate further.

Evan A. Laksmana is a Research Analyst at the, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. He is with the Indonesia Programme and has been involved in the Harvard Project for Asian and International Relations (HPAIR).