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Reform of Middle Eastern Militaries: Lessons from Indonesia

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The recent commando raid on a prison by Indonesian special forces provoked renewed debate about the need to further reform the military and subject it to civilian justice - 15 years after the end of autocratic rule in Jakarta. This illustrates the difficult road post-revolt nations in the Middle East and North Africa have to travel.

Commentary

THE RECENT RAID of an Indonesian prison and summary execution of four inmates by heavily armed Special Forces commandos has cast the spotlight on the risk involved in failing to fully reform the country's military - 15 years after the end of autocratic rule.

The raid and subsequent charging of 11 officers as well as other recent incidents involving security forces has sparked debate about the nature and terms of the reform including the fact that its members are accountable to military rather than civilian courts. Those courts have proven to be lenient in sentencing soldiers accused of murder.

Changing a culture of impunity

Critics blame the incidents on the failure to reform the internal workings and culture of the Indonesian armed forces. At the centre of the Indonesian debate lie questions that are certain to be raised in Middle Eastern nations like Egypt where the alleged impartiality of the armed forces during the 2011 overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak is under fire. Recent leaks of the report of a fact-finding mission established by President Mohamed Morsi assert that the military killed and tortured protesters during the revolt - charges the command of the armed forces has denied.

Human rights groups however accuse the police and security forces of continuing to arbitrarily arrest and torture suspects while militant soccer fans believe these forces, alongside the military, were responsible for last year's death of 74 people in a politically charged stadium brawl in Port Said.

The experience of countries like Indonesia and Turkey that have struggled for years with changing a culture of impunity pervasive throughout the military and security sector however highlight issues that go beyond upholding human rights. The military's exemption from full civilian control in Indonesia and Turkey limited the authority of a state seeking to establish itself as the catalyst of democratic rule.

Parallel systems of justice impinged on the rule of law. Lack of full civilian control in Egypt fuelled the continued existence beyond the law of a deep state - a network of vested political, military and business interests - similar to the one in Turkey that took decades to uproot and threatened political and economic change demanded by the European Union. The military's vested economic interests distorted economies because of fiscal concessions and access to inside information.

The raid by the Indonesian special forces, known as Kopassus, put the pitfalls of military and security sector reform back on the front burner. Kopassus members forced their way on 23 March into the prison in the city of Yogyakarta and took justice into their own hands by shooting dead four detainees accused of stabbing to death a sergeant during a fight in a bar. Two weeks earlier, scores of soldiers burnt a police station in South Sumatra and injured 17 police officers in retaliation for the shooting of one of theirs. The incidents followed the imprisonment of three soldiers in Papua in 2011 for torturing two detainees.

Fuelling discontent

The incidents sparked debate on the same issues confronting post-revolt nations like Egypt, foremost among which is what reform is needed to adapt the military and security forces to a democratic society; also whether non-transparent military courts are able and willing to maintain accepted human rights standards. Human rights groups in Indonesia are demanding that the military be accountable to the civilian justice system. Discontent in Egypt is fuelled by the failure so far to hold military and law enforcement officials accountable for the death of at least 900 people since the toppling of Mubarak.

A decade-and-a-half of democracy and free media enables Indonesia to publicly debate the effectiveness of past reforms. Restoration of a measure of political stability and economic recovery in crisis-riddled Egypt hinges in part on reform of at least the security sector - the most despised institution because of its role in enforcing the Mubarak-era repression.

The Indonesian military responded to the raid by relieving the military commander of Central Java of his duty for initially denying that Special Forces had been involved. By contrast, Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) warned against efforts to tarnish the military's image against a perceived background of a crackdown on the media.

To be sure, distrust of Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood, reinforced by the president's reliance on the security forces and the military despite his increasingly strained relations with the armed forces, undermines his ability to push through necessary reforms. Like in Indonesia where the 11 officers experienced a wave of support because their victims were alleged drug traffickers, efforts to reform the military in Egypt are complicated by a divided public, part of which believes that military rule is their country's only way out of its crisis.

Shared characteristics

The recent incidents in Indonesia nevertheless underscore the need to address reform of the military and security sector's internal procedures, ethical standards, education, training and compensation. Such reforms go far beyond replacing military commanders as Morsi did last year and this month's dismissal by Yemeni President Abd Rabbuh Mansur al-Hadi of senior officers related to the country's ousted leader, Al Abdullah Saleh. Those moves were largely motivated by Morsi and Al-Hadi's efforts to employ the military as tools to stabilise their grip on power.

The Indonesian and Egyptian military share a desire to retain their privileges. Admiral Agus Suhartono, the commander in chief of the Indonesian military, has rejected calls that the 11 soldiers be tried by a civilian rather than a military court. Similarly, Egyptian Justice Minister Ahmed Mekki insisted in a meeting with human rights activists earlier this year that it was the interior ministry's internal responsibility to reform its forces. One participant in the meeting said on Twitter that Mekki's remarks were "far worse" than anything he had heard from Mubarak's justice minister.

Like in Indonesia, the question of military reform in Egypt is complicated by public perception of the police and security forces, who are widely viewed as not only brutal but also incompetent and corrupt. Fifteen years of democracy and a vibrant media in Indonesia have failed to resolve issues but have made viable a healthy debate that will likely lead to change in which the armed forces have no choice but to participate. However the viability of that debate in post-revolt Middle Eastern nations has yet to pass the litmus test.

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