

Back on the beat?



For years, police were 'little brother' to soldiers. Will that now change? And will it bring back the friendly local cop?

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Inside Indonesia said in a newsbrief (October-December 1998) that the Indonesian police want to be separated from the military. The National Commission on Human Rights supports separation as an important step towards improving human rights. But why did the police become part of the armed forces in the first place?

From the day they were set up in 1945, police joined the army fighting the Dutch. They willingly saw themselves as combatants and accepted the consequences of being treated as soldiers when captured. They had no other reason than the heroic intention to keep Indonesia independent, but it was contrary to the 1948 Geneva Convention, which views police as civilians. This view accords with the widely accepted concept of a police force that belongs to the community rather than to the state or any political party.

With the fighting over, the police were increasingly drawn into politics by politicians who took advantage of their relationship with the organisation. Aware of this tendency, the Temporary People's Consultative Assembly (MPRS) decided in 1960 to place Polri within the armed forces. The intention was to remove both the police and the armed forces from influence by the political parties.

However, this new structure did not prevent the continuing politicisation of the armed forces. The communist party (PKI) had considerable influence within the police (as well as within the navy and the air force), whereas the army was strongly anti-communist.

This political factionalism within the armed forces exploded in the coup attempt of 30 September 1965, which the army leadership blamed on the PKI. Morale within the armed forces plummeted.

The new president, Suharto, then commanded a total integration of all wings, including the police, into a single and integrated military administration. Within half a decade Polri had lost its autonomy, its own ethos and also its special salary rank.

Youngest brother

Over the next 30 years as part of the military, the police developed a 'youngest brother' mentality. They often felt they were treated unfairly especially by the army, and lost their self-confidence.

The National Police Force, Polri, was in fact terribly exploited. Their role remained as political as ever - to maintain political security together with the army. The armed forces tended to back up almost anything Suharto's government considered important for the maintenance of power. By using Polri and its police power, the military had legal approval to use extra-legal methods. For example, curbing the press, arresting critical persons and generally eradicating public protest.

The worst part of being the 'youngest' wing in the military was that the police were not free to uphold the law. Many well-connected people were untouchable and thus enjoyed legal immunity. Polri often became a ready scapegoat put forward by the military whenever people protested against the way the military mishandled cases, caused unnecessary violence or escalated confrontation.

Police budgets have always fallen behind those of other military wings. Lack of equipment and poor pay prevent them from doing a good job. In the eyes of the other military wings, Polri are losers. The public, meanwhile, constantly mock police incompetence.

When the possibility of the police regaining their independence from the military was first raised openly in June 1998, the police secretly welcomed it. But the suggestion did not come from the general public, who seemed largely ignorant of the implications. Instead, police independence has remained an elitist debate rather than a subject discussed in society as a whole. Generally speaking people don't care, as long as the police become less corrupt, less brutal, and more accountable to the public. Unfortunately, it is difficult for Polri to guarantee that they will fulfill all those hopes.

The problem rests in the imbalanced relationship between the State and the public. The State has been able to do anything it chooses. Unless this relationship changes and a strong political commitment is brought to bear on the situation, any new structure won't necessarily improve policing. Perhaps rather than promoting the rule of law, it would just turn old policing problems into new, more sophisticated ones.

The only factor driving separation has been the determination or otherwise at Armed Forces (Abri) headquarters to let Polri go. The wave of reform after the downfall of Suharto in May 1998 struck Abri in many

ways. The public was flooded with revelations - the kidnapping of pro-democracy activists, the massacres in Aceh, Lampung, Tanjung Priok and East Timor, the continuing debate on the dual function of Abri, and lastly the issue of Polri as a part of the military.

Despite diminishing public sympathy for Abri, headquarters has hesitated to respond to Polri's idea of saying 'goodbye' to Abri.

Abri's reason for retaining Polri as a part of the armed forces is rather peculiar. Despite Polri's poor performance and image during its years in the military, the armed forces insist that 'historically' Polri belongs in Abri. Understandably enough, they over-emphasise certain episodes in that history, while failing to acknowledge others.

Abri's recent plan to recruit thousands of civilians as 'military-trained civilians', rather than empowering the crippled police, must be seen as another signal for the public to give up thinking of a Polri separate from Abri.

However, even if it is excluded from Abri, it doesn't mean Polri's problems are over. The police themselves are not in any sense ready for this big change. More is involved than just a change in structure and the question of who will be in charge. Separation will mean turning the police back into a fully civilian force, in performance, behaviour and, above all, in their attitude.

Officers working the streets can no longer expect people to obey them, as they once did, simply because they have a military uniform, baton or firearm. They will have to depend on their personal capabilities when dealing with people. The separation could be a nightmare!

Internally, the new police force would need to solve a host of bureaucratic problems - for example, how to flatten the rank structure from 22 ranks to 6 or 7 ranks as in many other countries. Externally, there needs to be a decision whether they will fall under the Ministry of Home Affairs or have their own. Each choice has political consequences.

Finally, what about Polri's 'old brother', the army? Soldiers may find it difficult to accept they are no longer able to ridicule the police. One situation we are most afraid of is when a soldier refuses to obey the police and fights back when about to be arrested for a crime.

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