

‘Indonesian Military Reforms Fail to Get U.S. Attention’

Open Forum with

Colonel John Haseman

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American policy towards the Indonesian military, influenced by current “anti-Indonesian rhetoric” of small groups, reflects an outdated view of Indonesia based on the violence perpetrated by the military in East Timor in 1999, said Colonel John Haseman, a former defense attaché in Jakarta at a USINDO talk on February 6.

In the past ten years much has changed, he said, requiring a new look. Indonesia is not getting credit for reforms already implemented, such as a genuine withdrawal of the military from political parties and the rejection of a political role in government. Moreover, he said, those responsible for past abuses have, with few exceptions, already retired, so the effect of continued restrictions on relations punishes the innocent.

“Since September there has been a very interesting development: a total change in the military leadership’s top four positions,” he said. “I haven’t yet met any of the four, but they are all professional military and apolitical.” General Djoko Santoso, chairman of the joint chiefs, was Kostrad (the Army’s Strategic Reserve Command) and General Agustadi Sasongko Purnomo, Army chief of staff, was the most senior officer in the army and has a good reputation from Aceh and Maluku. Admiral Sumardjono has become the Navy chief of staff, and Air Chief Marshal Subandria, Air Force chief of staff, was previously vice chief of staff. New commanders of Kostrad and Kopassus (the Army’s Special Forces group) have also been named. The President is picking good people, by seniority, and the impression is that personal relations are not as important.

Within the last ten years a whole new generation of military leaders has come into command and none of the U.S. leaders know these people because of the halt on IMET programs for 12 years. [The International Military Education and Training program is a U.S. program that provides extended education and training for foreign military officers in the United States. It was halted for Indonesia in 1992 after a massacre of East Timor civilians at Santa Cruz cemetery in 1991.] Indonesia is too important a country. Not knowing the military leadership “should never be allowed to happen again,” Haseman said.

Even after post-tsunami relief efforts and joint exercises, “we don’t know each other,” he said. Reestablishing personal relationships between military leaders of both countries is essential, “not just shaking hands.”

There are compelling reasons for the U.S. and Indonesia to have a “robust relationship,” he said. Security in the Malacca Straits is of obvious importance, but Indonesia is also a “very reliable partner” in counter-terrorism activities. Other convergent national interests for military to military relations are regional

stability (especially including Australia), investment, regional economics and influence in ASEAN.

Opportunities for closer cooperation include UN peacekeeping missions, disaster relief efforts, and health and disease issues.

Q: Maybe it is still possible to hold the two star generals responsible for past abuses, even though history has gone on.

A: The problems with the Dili shootings in 1999 were not because of a lack of punishment. Indonesia fired a national hero who was a commander, and a graduate of the IMET program investigated the incident. The issue was in not accounting for the casualties. Today that number still isn’t public. These kinds of problems can be overcome with more education and training. I’m confident the TNI wants this education.

Q: Where do you draw the benchmarks for reform?

A: There is a long list of reforms, but there aren’t really any benchmarks. This is a broader issue. The TNI has done a lot that they can do alone. Publicity should be given to these efforts, such as

the fact that military officers can now be tried by civilian courts. The military record in Aceh after East Timor was good, but it wasn't publicized. There are many other possible reforms, but the reality is that not all can be implemented at this time. The military cannot completely withdraw from business until the government compensates with funding from the official budget.

Q: What is the impact of Suharto's death on the military?

A: It's too early to tell. What amazes me is the outpouring of public grief. Most people had a better life under Suharto, whether we approve of his methods or not. The percentage of human rights victims to total population was small and the majority of Indonesians were uninvolved. In any case, Suharto had been out of

office since 1998. The generals beholden to him are gone.

Q: On military transformation, how does UN peacekeeping fit in?

A: Indonesia places high priority on peacekeeping missions. Peacekeeping missions also provide training for the Indonesian military. People who do well in peacekeeping missions get promoted. Indonesia is the largest Muslim force in Lebanon and they want to go to Darfur. The will is there, the people are there, but the resources are not. The TNI has a valid reason to have new equipment. (The U.S. military airlifted Indonesian troops to its peacekeeping mission in Cambodia.) Some Congressional staff members should attend the annual dialogue meetings between the TNI and the Defense Department.