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## Review Article

# Civil–Military Relations during Transition and Post-Democratisation Periods: A View from Southeast Asia

Hipolitus Yolisandry Ringgi Wangge

**Abstract:** The civil–military dynamic in Southeast Asia has been a contested issue for years. Although most countries in the region have been undertaken democratic governance, the military role in politics remains relatively unresolved. After having relatively stable civilian governments for over a decade, the Thai military launched another coup in 2014 to topple a democratically elected government. In Indonesia and the Philippines, the military has been moderately controlled by the democratically elected civilian governments, but their professional roles in sustaining democratic principles and values are also questionable. Accordingly, the crucial issues are the role that the military plays in the transition period, such as in Thailand, and the degree to which the military is institutionalised under civilian control in nascent democracies, such as Indonesia and the Philippines. These issues are addressed in the books discussed herein.

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**Keywords:** Southeast Asia, democracy, civil–military relations, politics

**Hipolitus Yolisandry Ringgi Wangge** is a researcher with the Marthinus Academy in Jakarta. His current research focuses on ethnic politics in West Papua and democratisation in developing countries, particularly the roles that crucial actors, such as the military, play within a regime during periods of transition and consolidation. His interests also extend to regional studies on Africa and Southeast Asia and to security studies in Asia.

E-mail: <hipolitusringgi@gmail.com>

Aurel Croissant and David Kuehn (eds) (2017), *Reforming Civil-Military Relations in New Democracies: Democratic Control and Military Effectiveness in Comparative Perspectives*, Switzerland: Springer, ISBN 978-3-319-53188-5, 228 pages

Terence Lee (2015), *Defect or Defend: Military Responses to Popular Protests in Authoritarian Asia*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, ISBN: 9781421415161, 264 pages

Zoltan Barany (2012), *The Soldier and the Changing State: Building Democratic Armies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, ISBN: 9780691137698, 472 pages

Jongseok Woo (2011), *Security Challenges and Military Politics in East Asia: From State Building to Post-Democratization*, New York: the Continuum International Publishing Group, ISBN-13: 978-1441184337, 232 pages

The military plays a critical role in shaping the government pathway in many developing countries. Western countries establish the military as a coercive agency that is democratically controlled and has oversight from the civilian government. In many developing countries, by contrast, the military can act also as a government or a junior partner of civilian government and can rule, dominate or highly influence the country for years. Even though the number of military and quasi-military regimes has declined since the third wave of democracy, the military's ambition and capability to exert influence to take office and rule a country lingers.

In Southeast Asia, the debate over civil–military relations is still relevant. Some countries, such as Indonesia and the Philippines, that were once ruled by military-backed regimes have undertaken a democratic consolidation process. In other countries, such as Myanmar and Thailand, the military can govern the country relatively easily, despite the democratic transition and consolidation periods being underway or having passed. However, my focus here is on three countries in Southeast Asia, namely Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines. These countries have all experienced military-backed regimes in their modern histories. One of them, Thailand, is still showing the massive role of the military in its governments.

The debate over military involvement in politics in the Southeast Asian region is focused on several stances: structural vs. agency strains; an institutional separation vs. a regional adjustment; a cohesive vs. factionalised military; a modernisation approach vs. a regime protector: and demolishing vs. guarding military privileges. Certain credible studies on the issue have used these stances, such as Stephen Hadley, Marcus Mietzner, the two separate volumes edited by Muthiah Alagappa, and

Aurel Croissant et al. (Hoadley 2012; Mietzner 2011; Alagappa 2002; Croissant, Kuehn, and Lorenz 2012). Although these scholars differ in their elucidation of the decisive factors that shape the path of democratic transition and consolidation, and of the roles the military should play in two critical periods of democracy, they generally agree that the key concern in many developing countries is how to sustain democratic values and practices, particularly once the elected civilian government establishes civilian control over the military.

The books written by Lee and Woo provide sequential arguments with no comprehensive explanations of how the civilian government institutionalised civilian control over the military during recent transition (Thailand) and post-democratisation (Indonesia and the Philippines) periods in Southeast Asia. Zoltan's book discusses the role of democratic army in a transition period but makes no thorough arguments about how civilian control over the military can result in effectiveness of the military organisation in terms of defence and security policy-making processes in post-democratisation countries, particularly in Southeast Asia. Only Croissant et al. provide a plausible discussion on the institutionalisation of civilian control leading to the degree of military effectiveness that can be implemented during a consolidated democratic period, particularly in Indonesia.

In line with the debate over structure vs. agency, Lee focuses on the military as an actor that is either unified or fragmented in response to regime change. Woo and Zoltan provide structural context in which the military operates its strategies and resources to either counter or favour regime transition to democracy. The book edited by Aurel Croissant and David Kuehn discusses how the structural and agency approaches are combined, with specific focus on civilian control and military effectiveness, to shed light on civil–military dynamics in nascent democracies.

Four important arguments of the books are: the factors that drive the military to become a political actor and a partner of the civilian government; the military's response to critical situations; the conditions supportive to the military's becoming a democratic military; and how the civilian control can be institutionalised and its implications on the military organisation within nascent democratic countries. However, I argue in this review that these works have several shortcomings. Before I discuss further these weaknesses, I will highlight the arguments of each of the authors.

Lee's book proposes an institutional setting of the regimes as a primary factor that determines the role of the military during transition period from authoritarian to democratic governments or extends the

longevity of an authoritarian regime. By illuminating the interplay between institutions and actors, Lee argues that the character of autocratic regimes can determine people's actions, particularly those of the military in response to popular mobilisation; these military actions, in turn, pave the way to either democratisation or maintenance of the regime. On the one hand, an authoritarian regime will be defended against popular protests if the autocratic leader shares power among elites, including the military. On the other hand, if the regime is ruled by a personalistic pattern in which power is concentrated in the hands of one figure, there is greater elite liability for fragmentation and that will create more opportunities to defect from the regime when an uprising erupts. This scenario is particularly the case with a military that has been politicised as an institution.

In the case of the Philippines and Indonesia, the personalistic pattern that characterised the Marcos and Suharto presidencies was a driving force for the military to side with civil society and overthrow the authoritarian regimes. Otherwise, the patronage system and power sharing among the elites enabled the military under the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to defend the junta in Myanmar against demonstrations in 2007 (170) and extend the military junta regime.

On the contrary, Jongseok Woo argues that threats, both internal and external, have prompted the military to play more roles domestically to counter such threats. Accordingly, threats are a primary structural cause that may lead the military to be politically influential. The critical contribution of Woo's book is the extent to which the military's involvement in domestic politics depends on the degree of threats faced by the country and, in turn, will provide different trajectories of the military's involvement in the domestic sphere. Accordingly, the different modes of domestic intervention will be determined by three important factors: military cohesiveness, civilian leadership, and civil society.

High external and internal threats will expand military organisation, lead the civilian leaders to favour the military and, in turn, make the military a source of regime survival. The military not only defends the nation against foreign occupation and internal insurgencies as a coercive actor, but also provides a basis to claim the right to become a political actor that could involve itself in domestic matters.

Internal threats from communist rebellions and Muslim insurgencies paved the way for Ferdinand Marcos to politicise the military for his own interest for over 20 years in power. A politicised army was a backbone of Marcos' regime and gradually transformed the mind-set of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) to become a crucial political

actor during the transition and consolidation periods. Even during post-democratisation regimes, such as those of Arroyo's and Aquino Jr., internal military appointment was a source of political patronage to the regimes. In Indonesia, a struggle against the Dutch occupation paved the way for the Indonesian military (TNI) to claim a birth-right principle, in which the military was also an institution that created a nation-state (Ringgi 2012). Moreover, communist and Islamist rebellions, as well as regional insurgencies, gave the military the opportunity to become a dominant political actor after 1965, with the former General Suharto making the military a junior partner of the government for more than 30 years.

To complement the argument of institutional and structural conditions of the military role, Barany Zoltan's book proposes a concept of a democratic army as the means of controlling the military from intervening in the nation-state building process. As he puts it, the military is the most important institution for boosting the government politically. Diverse political and socioeconomic environments make the military adaptable to either challenge or support the regime. Therefore, the military as a subject to be democratised is a crucial factor before the civilian government subordinates it under democratic principles.

Zoltan argues that when the military agrees to support the newly elected government, the latter must create a supportive condition in order for the military to perform its primary task. Zoltan argues that there are three primary settings to be considered – the after-war, regime change, and state transformation – in order to keep the military under civilian control. Accordingly, the four essential functions are (1) shared responsibility between the executive and the legislative branches to oversee the defence sector, particularly personnel, the organisational setting, weapons procurement, and financial decisions; (2) a relationship among the executive branch, particularly the president or prime minister, the defence minister, and the armed forces within the military chain of command. In this regard, the military will help to advise its civilian counterparts on all security- and defence-related matters and the civilian leaders will give orders to the military based on democratic constitutional rights; (3) internal reforms of the military that can respond to the dynamics of a democratic system; and (4) the social recruitment and composition of the officers to reflect the society's cultural and gender variation.

In Southeast Asia, Zoltan highlights the importance adjustment conditions of the military to the democratic condition. Thailand's military could not support its democratically elected government since the military was unwilling to respond to different political economic condi-

tions after electoral politics emerged in the early 2000s. In contrast, the Indonesian military could manage to become part of the democratic regime without as much political leverage as it had during the Suharto's authoritarian regime. Nevertheless, the civilian government still has work to do, particularly to control the military's business-related activities, which are under less oversight; to hold the military accountable for its past and recent human right abuses (for example, in Papua, some officers related to past human rights cases received promotion to upper-ranking positions); and to firmly institutionalise its control over so-called military operations other than war.

The edited book by Aurel Croissant and David Kuehn provides significant insights into how civil–military relations are managed through civilian control and military effectiveness. Civilians create national policies through an institutional process that is unimpeded by formal military prerogatives and informal contestation. As a result, the military can have the capability to fulfil its national defence role and mission based on strategic planning, institutional arrangement, financial resources. The degree of civilian control is categorised as *high* if the military does not challenge the civilian authority through the military privileges and contestations; *medium* if the military enjoys certain privileges, including political power, due to formal regulations, but does not dominate the political arena; and *low* if the military dominates decision-making and implementation in the civilian institutional process.

For Croissant and Kuehn, the interrelationship of civilian control and military effectiveness is an integrative approach in which civil–military dynamics are shaped by historical, cultural, political, societal and international factors. Accordingly, both military and civilian actions are constrained by institutional policies, in that the former has to follow orders created politically by the latter. In this regard, civilian control can maximise military effectiveness for two reasons. First, defence and military policies are national policies that garner public support; thus, the civilian government will favour solid defence and security policies. Second, the civilian government reflects a national perspective rather than organisational biases on defence issues; thus, it will eliminate potential internal–military divisions, based on different service branches, that could pursue their own interests instead of the public interest. As a result, civilian control and military effectiveness are highly determined by the interests of relevant actors and also the international context in which the national defence and military reforms operate.

In the case of Indonesia, civilian control and military effectiveness have been partially achieved and implemented. As a legacy of the New

Order, a military-backed regime, in terms of military domination in policy-making, is still relatively intact. In his discussion of Minimum Essential Force (MEF), Aditya Gunawan elucidates that civilian control and military effectiveness are relatively *medium*. MEF is a relatively ambitious plan for military posture development, covering three phases from 2010 to 2024. Through MEF, civilians have limited influence on the policy-making process, particularly on defence policy formulation and implementation, and also on oversight of the policy (p. 141). Accordingly, the MEF, which lacks solid doctrinal and operational structures, has no doctrinal adjustment to reflect change in geopolitical conditions. Indonesia's national defence is still based on a territorial-warfare strategy and people mobilisation – a legacy from the revolutionary war for independence.

The lack of civilian authority on military organisation policy also impedes joint command innovation among the three military services. Gunawan further highlights the programme of the Joint Regional Defence Command (*Kogabwilhan*), which serves as the first deterrent force against external intruders, receives strong opposition from the military, particularly from the army, which enjoys the current territorial command structure across the country. In this regard, modern command and operation structures do not have strong acceptance among Indonesian military officers, due partly to the long-running conception of the New Order regime, which positioned the Indonesian military as a social force instead of a professional force. Another constraining factor on military effectiveness is the lack of a solid institutional arrangement on national defence and military policies among relevant actors. Two examples are the overlapping authority of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and the Indonesian military (TNI) headquarters, and the lack of a civilian role and expertise on defence issues in the legislative arena. As a result, when the TNI signed memorandums of understanding with several government agencies to deploy army personnel for non-defence duties – teachers and “agriculture consultants” – there was no rejection from the MoD, which has the authority, based on the 2000 Law on State Defence, over TNI deployment for military operations other than war. In addition, the Indonesian parliament has been unable to thoroughly and effectively oversee the implementation of a military reform agenda, due partly to lack of defence expertise and also to regular rotation of parties, which hampers members of parliament from accumulating relevant expertise. Since the downfall of Suharto in 1998, the Indonesian military is still trying to find the right pathway to adapt to democratic principles that



enhance civilian control over the defence and military organisation policies, which are still clearly problematic.

All of these authors provide linked arguments – namely, institutional, structural and agency approaches – in order to elucidate how the military is involved in the domestic scene. Accordingly, the military is not merely a coercive actor but also a political actor, particularly during any transition period from authoritarianism to democracy. However, the insights provided by these three authors offer little in terms of explaining how the military has found an appropriate role in recent consolidation periods, particularly in Thailand and post-democratisation periods, such as in Indonesia and the Philippines. One important aspect of seeking an appropriate role is the institutionalisation of civil–military relations by undertaking deep military reforms in order to sustain democratic values and practices.

Concerning the pathway to initiating deep military reforms, Aurel Croissant et al. provide three important factors: power strategies, legitimisation, and even compensation (Croissant et al. 2013: 49). These factors are used by the democratic civilian government to ascertain whether military reforms can be implemented or not, after a country has embarked on its consolidation period following the transition from authoritarianism.

Lee's book discusses regime type as a primary resource for providing political choices for both civilians and the military in times of crisis within the government and the effects toward the nation's stability; however, it does not provide a clear argument regarding the basis on which these competing actors can legitimate their actions related to that crisis. Woo's argument emphasises more the structural context of security threats combined with the institutional arrangement – that is, the strength of civilian leadership, military cohesiveness, and civil society – as the primary driving force that shape civil–military relations, most importantly during the transition period. However, security threats have less to do with the strategies adopted by the democratically elected civilian government in the consolidation period, particularly when options to push deeper internal military reforms are available, such as in the Philippines and Indonesia. In contrast, the civilian governments in Thailand have not displayed a high degree of interest in what constitutes security threats other than internal strife between competing political factions within the country.

Zoltan's book explains efforts to democratically institutionalise the civil–military relations in Southeast Asian countries. According to Zoltan, building a democratic army is advanced by supportive conditions under

which the military can operate within a consolidated democratic regime. In this regard, by accepting the democratic regime, the military must undergo internal military reform. However, the book does not specifically discuss either the areas in which the military can be prompted to make such reforms, or the basis of legitimacy or compensation from the civilian government from which the military can make them. In explaining this gap, Croissant et al. provide useful arguments on five key areas in which civilian control of the military can be measured and the extent to which internal military reform can be implemented; namely, elite recruitment, public policy, internal security, national defence, and military organisation. All five decision-making areas have to be based on the cultural and historical conditions of the society.

As a result of the lack of a clear pathway to institutionalise civil-military relations in the democratic consolidation period, the military may even use democratic means to regain its power, as occurred in Thailand. Accordingly, Thailand's army under General Prayuth Chan Ocha is the key actor that determined how Thailand set a democratic pathway after the coup in 2014. Additionally, the military-drafted constitution has guaranteed the military seats in the executive and legislative branches.

In the case of the Philippines, the institutionalisation of civilian control in an internal security policy has been low, particularly during the administration of Rodrigo Duterte. Through his campaign on drugs and terrorism in the southern part of the country, the military regained its domination over internal security policy-making. Accordingly, the Duterte's government allowed the military to support his public campaign on drugs, which cost many civilian lives without legal consequences. In addition, the military campaign against an Islamic state-backed group in Marawi has paved the way for the military to dominate the decision-making process on defence and internal security spheres without solid oversight and critique from the parliament and civil society organisations.

All of the privileges held by the Indonesian military are traceable to the character of a political military, particularly through the army territorial commands, which have not been thoroughly reduced or reorganised. Although the military does not have an official political role like it had during the authoritarian regimes, a so-called "informal political network" does exist. This network, which ranges from national to local levels, is established through retired military officers who occupy ministerial positions or have access to the executive circle. The network can be used to hamper any initiatives from civil society to push for more internal military reforms that would embrace civilian perspectives. In the current administration, Indonesia's President Joko Widodo has even placed

some retired “conservative” generals in strategic security-related ministries such as the coordinating ministry of politics, legal and security affairs; and the Ministry of Defence, as well as the national intelligence agency. With these appointments, the prospect of continuing military reforms to be more adaptable to the Indonesia’s surrounding external threats and deep-seated democratic values, which were stalled during the former general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s presidency, are less likely to be enacted since these former army generals have absolutely no intention of putting such reforms into a government agenda.

In addition, since Joko Widodo only relies only on his office power, without a strong political base, he has to forge political allies with different organisations, including the military, which has been gradually displaying its profile as a social force instead of a professional force. As result, the TNI Commander Gatot Nurmantyo can express his political ambitions publicly, although this is at odds with democratic features of strong civilian control over the military organisation.

The civilian governments of Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines have no interest in deeply and thoroughly institutionalising civilian control over the military, particularly at the civilian-elite and military-elite level of relations. These facts will inhibit any efforts to push an agenda of further and deep military reform, regarding, for example, the military justice system, military businesses, and civilisation of the MoD. In Indonesia, reform would also include the restructuring of territorial command into a joint regional defence command.

Civil–military relations in Southeast Asia have another shortcoming which is not discussed in these four books. The perception of the citizenry is relatively overlooked in explaining the dynamic relations between the military and civilians. The relations described by the authors are merely those between the state and the military as a part of the state; they do not include society. There is no agreement, however, between the political elite, the military, and the citizenry about the role the military should play during the post-coup period in Thailand and post-democratisation in Indonesia and the Philippines. In this regard, as Rachel Schiff (2009) argues, the military’s involvement in the domestic sphere will be determined by the extent to which all three partners can reach a consensus, which will have to be based on the cultural and historical conditions of society. In all four books the lack of cultural and historical settings lead to a lack of thorough explanation of why the military is still perceived as the guardian of the state in Thailand and the Philippines and as the most trusted, non-corrupt institution in Indonesia. In Thailand, where there is a societal perception of the military as a key

instrument to return order, the coup was seen as a part of the culture (Farrelly 2013). In addition, human rights abuses committed by the military are still tolerated by society in each of the three countries.

Another missing point is that the authors have focused heavily on the elites' perception of the dynamics of civil–military relations in the region. In this regard, an elite-driven concept of the military discourages the role of low-ranking officers who participate in military operational duties on a daily basis. During a regime crisis, low-ranking officers risk their lives since they are on the front line in containing popular protests. Likewise, in Thailand, one faction of the military refused to suppress the red movement in a series of protests in Bangkok in 2006. One military faction's stance reflected its connection with rural areas in north and north-eastern parts of Thailand, which is where the majority of red movement members come from. Nevertheless, the military's elites ignored such an attitude from such a group, preferring a harsher approach to containing the popular uprising.

Moreover, these officers can be manipulated by their commanders to protect the many military businesses that do not have oversight from a legislative branch within a democratic system. These officers can even be implicated in the businesses. It is widely known that the commanders and the military elites abused their power by using low-ranking officers as a means of conducting illegal business activities, ranging from providing security services, such as in Indonesia, and the Philippines; to occupying civilian departments, such as in Thailand.

Although these four works provide little discussion of the aforementioned shortcomings, they are highly recommended to anyone interested in the dynamics of democracy in Southeast Asia, particularly the role of the military in the recent transition and post-democratisation periods. These aforementioned authors, with their expertise on the issue of civil-military relations, have provided advanced insights that may form a bridge from the lack of discussion on the role of the military in South-east Asia to a more thorough conceptualisation.

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