

Indonesia passes controversial law allowing greater military role in government

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Activists in world's third-largest democracy warn the legal changes signal a return to military dominance in civilian affairs that characterised Suharto years

Indonesia's law minister has denied the law change was a return to the military dominance that characterised the Suharto dictatorship, saying it was necessary due to domestic and geopolitical challenges. Photograph: Ajeng Dinar Ulfiana/Reuters

Indonesia has ratified controversial changes to its military law allowing armed forces personnel to hold more civilian posts, a move that analysts fear could usher in a resurgence of the military in government affairs.

Activists in the world's third-largest democracy have criticised the revisions, warning they signal a return to Indonesia's "New Order" era, when the country was led by former authoritarian ruler Suharto, who stepped down in 1998.

The country is now led by President [Prabowo Subianto](#), an ex-special forces general and former Suharto son-in-law, who was inaugurated in October.

Indonesia's law minister, Supratman Andi Agtas, has denied the law was a return to the military dominance that characterised the Suharto dictatorship, saying instead it was necessary due to domestic and geopolitical challenges.

Defending the revised law, defence minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin told parliament: "The geopolitical changes and global military technology require the military to transform ... to face conventional and non conventional conflicts."

Before the law was passed, active soldiers were able to hold posts in organisations such as the defence ministry and state intelligence agency. The changes broaden the scope of civilian posts that officers can hold, including the attorney general's office, the state secretariat, the counterterrorism agency and the narcotics agency. It also extends sitting officers' retirement age.

The parliament, which is dominated by Prabowo's ruling coalition, approved the revised changes in a plenary session on Thursday.

Speaker Puan Maharani led the unanimous vote and officially passed the law, saying that it was in accordance with the principle of democracy and human rights.

"President Prabowo appears intent on restoring the Indonesian military's role in civilian affairs, which were long characterised by widespread abuses and impunity," said [Andreas Harsono](#), senior Indonesia researcher at Human Rights Watch. "The government's rush to adopt these amendments undercuts its expressed commitment to human rights and accountability."

Kennedy Muslim, a political analyst from Indonesian pollster Indikator, said: “We’ve seen this creeping militarisation for quite some time, that’s why civil society is right to be alarmed by this trend. But I think the concern that this is back to the New Order is quite overblown at the moment.”

Muslim said that polls show the military consistently ranks high in public trust surveys, but the new law had the potential to erode this.

The bill was approved less than two months after the president formally requested an amendment to the legislation. Activists have complained about the expedited lawmaking process, and the secretive nature of deliberations over the bill.

Students organisations have said they plan to protest outside the parliament in Jakarta on Thursday, with one student group, describing the law as “democracy killing”.

Kate Lamb

P.S.

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