



## THE PHILIPPINE AND INDONESIAN MILITARIES' WAR ON COVID-19, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR REFORM

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Faced with limited resources and poor health care systems, Indonesia and the Philippines have used their militaries to contain the Covid-19 pandemic. President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo of Indonesia and President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines are known for their heavy reliance on military resources. The Covid-19 response has proven this dependency as the two presidents put military men in charge of task forces to handle the pandemic, hoping the organizational effectiveness of the armed forces would produce a fruitful outcome. While this pragmatic approach might be useful in the short term, continuation of this strategy could strain civil-military relations in the long term.

### Indonesia: Personal Ties and Critical Legacy of Territorial Structure

Jokowi’s [appointment](#) of Doni Monardo, a three-star army general and a former commander of the Army’s Special Force (Kopassus) and the Presidential Security Details (Paspampres), as the head of National Disaster Mitigation Agency (BNPB) is unsurprising, as leadership of the organization has traditionally been held by military officers since its inception, relying on their strong leadership, vast networks, and ability to provide a swift response in times of emergency. However, Monardo’s appointment, plus the inclusion of a number of [senior military figures](#) on the task force, such as Minister of Health Terawan Agus Putranto and Minister of Defense Prabowo Subianto, present

implications both for inter-military dynamics and civil-military relations.

Having military figures on the central structures has had a domino effect on the task force at the regional level. Jakarta Military Command Chief Maj. Gen. Eko Margiyono was appointed head of Jakarta’s new emergency hospital. Monardo and Margiyono are close associates in the army. In 2010, Margiyono replaced Monardo as the group A commander of the [Paspampres](#). Both have also served as the commander of Kopassus. For Monardo to work with someone he trusts and is familiar with arguably enhances coordination with the central government.

The military also offers its overarching territorial command structure for the speedy distribution of relief. Following the formation of the task force, Prabowo Subianto [requested that the armed forces](#) dispatch an aircraft to pick up medical kits from Shanghai. The military later distributed them to each region across the archipelago, deploying the air force’s aircraft. The Military District Command coordinated distribution.

Territorial command has always been the target of military reform due to its past political interventions under the New Order regime. However, civilian authorities seem reluctant to push more substantial reforms, given that the structure has been a reliable counterpart in times of crisis. The use of army territorial structure in handling the Covid-19 response clearly added another strong justification for maintaining the system.

### Philippines: Marawi and Military Work Culture

In mid-March, President Duterte [declared](#) the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) for the entire Luzon area, followed by the formation of the National Task Force (NTF) on Covid-19 led by three retired military generals: Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana as chairman, Interior Secretary Eduardo Ano as vice chairman, and Peace Process Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr as chief implementer. The three generals are no strangers to one another. They worked together during the five-month [Marawi Siege](#): Lorenzana as the administrator of martial law, Ano as the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief of

staff and chief implementor of martial law, and Galvez as Western Mindanao Command chief.

Bayan Muna party-list lawmakers [lambasted the appointment](#), saying the ECQ is an undeclared martial law and health experts or economists should have been at the wheel. Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo was quick to [defend Duterte's choice](#), arguing that the retired generals' discipline, working culture, and less bureaucratic nature will be essential in curbing the pandemic.

The appointment of senior military figures also allows rapid deployment of AFP, as there is a high degree of obedience among military men toward their seniors. The implementation of the ECQ requires substantial manpower and logistics, of which AFP's involvement is urgently needed. First, the enormous number of military officers are useful to help guard checkpoints, as the Philippines National Police (PNP) has limited manpower. Second, the AFP's transportation capability is immensely useful. As examples, AFP picked up medical equipment from China by using the air force's C-130 aircraft and delivered laboratory specimens from other regions to Manila using light transport aircraft. Third, AFP and local contractors built a makeshift hospital at the Navy's Naval Station Jose Francisco to accommodate Covid-19 patients.

AFP has been very [attentive](#) to not create public fear in performing its duties in guarding the ECQ, ensuring that its personnel will be [minimally armed](#), only for security reasons. Duterte, however, blundered when he ordered police and military to shoot any [ECQ offenders](#). Duterte's authoritarian tendencies might become a stumbling block to AFP in pursuing further reforms.

### **Covid-19 and the Cost to Inter-Military Dynamics**

Although there are criticisms of the Jokowi and Duterte administrations' over their highly securitized approach, it should not be neglected that public approval of the military in both countries is high. In October 2019, Indonesian newspaper *Kompas* [released a survey](#) that the Indonesian armed forces has a positive image among 96.6% respondents, the highest recorded since the post-reformation era. Similarly, in March 2020, private pollster SWS

[released a survey](#) that showing 79% of respondents were satisfied with the AFP's performance, thanks to AFP's efforts to take back control of Marawi.

Deploying uniformed officers, however, comes with a cost for intra-organizational dynamics. The formation of Covid-19 task forces in both countries primarily exploits patron-client relationships between junior and senior officers to reduce frictions in carrying out necessary measures. Patronage-based appointments will further nurture factionalism that has been a recurring problem in both militaries.

The patronage-based system will also lead to ramifications in responding to the outbreak. This pattern indicates that the civilian leadership relies on a particular group to implement policies. As information related to the Covid-19 outbreak remains vague and scattered, it can trigger competition among different factions to gather information in order to improve their bargaining position among civilian authorities. Subsequently, each faction might be reluctant to share information and civilian authorities will encounter challenges in putting together the puzzle. This trend also raises questions over military professionalism as it indicates that obedience is determined not by the established chain of command or hierarchy, but personal allegiance.

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