

Command Politics: Militarized Governance and Its Fragility in Prabowo's Indonesia

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This article introduces the concept of command politics to analyse how presidential authority is exercised under President Prabowo Subianto. It argues that the Prabowo administration has adopted command politics, a militarized mode of rule, in which the armed forces are repurposed as an instrument of presidential authority. This militarized core is enabled by two supporting mechanisms: the imposition of political control over coalition parties and the empowerment of key loyalists to enforce compliance with presidential directives. This article shows that the administration's political dominance and persistent governance failures are two sides of the same coin. Command politics' unified command structure and unity of purpose enable the mass mobilization of manpower and resources but also disable the technocratic deliberation and feedback mechanisms that effective governance requires. Thus far, the mechanisms that generate compliance prevent those failures from generating political consequences, but the administration looks increasingly fragile. The militarization of civilian governance, which builds permanent institutional infrastructure for the military to advance the president's agenda, is the most consequential and durable transformation of the Prabowo era.

Keywords: Indonesia, civil-military relations, militarization, executive aggrandizement, presidentialism.

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On 25 October 2024, a striking scene greeted Indonesians as they scrolled through photos and reels on social media. Newly inaugurated President Prabowo Subianto and his ministers stood dressed in military fatigues at the Military Academy in Magelang, the military training school for officer cadets. Over the next three days, Indonesians watched as cabinet ministers participated in early-morning physical exercises and foot drills and then attended lectures and seminars as part of a team-bonding retreat for the new government.¹ In his closing address, Prabowo declared his intention to bring a “military way” into government, calling upon ministers to demonstrate discipline and loyalty in service of the nation.²

This article takes Prabowo’s declaration seriously. It examines how Prabowo has governed by importing the military’s organizing principles—hierarchy, obedience and disciplined execution—into civilian governance. Even before his inauguration, Prabowo’s spokesperson had likened him to a *panglima* (commander), with ministers expected to be *tegak lurus* (fully aligned) with the president’s development agenda.³ Once Prabowo entered office, it became customary for ministers to stand at attention and salute when his name was mentioned during speeches. Expressions of unconditional alignment with presidential priorities became routine practice across coalition parties. Beyond political parties, Prabowo has relied on a small inner circle to manage the executive and legislative branches on his behalf. As such, Prabowo’s rule has been qualitatively different from the patronage politics that characterized much of Indonesia’s post-Suharto era.

This article calls this mode of governance “command politics”. This refers to the imposition, by an elected president in a competitive multiparty system, of a unified command structure that integrates top-down control over coalition parties, empowers key loyalists across the executive and legislative branches and repurposes the military as an instrument of presidential authority. Its novelty lies in the integration of these elements and the importation of military values—hierarchy, obedience and disciplined execution—into civilian government. At its core is the militarization of governance, which has two faces: the militarization as ethos, which infuses the “military way” into the conduct of civilian government; and the militarization as institution, which repurposes the armed forces as an instrument of presidential rule, expanding the military’s institutional role and capacity to spearhead civilian development programmes while keeping it personally subordinate to the president. This militarized

core, in turn, depends on two supporting mechanisms. Building on precedents first set by former President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, Prabowo has imposed political control over his coalition parties and empowered a narrow inner circle of loyalists to enforce compliance with presidential directives across the executive and legislative branches. They now operate in service of the command logic of the militarized core they enable.

Command politics is not simply a manifestation of worsening autocratization or militarization in Indonesia. Instead, it is a novel combination of the two. The existing literature has clearly documented the weaponization of legal tools in driving executive aggrandizement in Indonesia.⁴ Sana Jaffrey and Eve Warburton argue that Jokowi’s partisan manipulation of state resources and harassment of opposition figures brought Indonesia to “the edge of competitive authoritarianism”, producing an electoral system that is no longer fair.⁵ Liam Gammon observes that Prabowo rapidly consolidated a “hegemonic presidency” during his first year in office, as political elites pre-emptively subordinated themselves to presidential power.⁶ These trends align with the broader academic literature on democratic backsliding, which argues that would-be authoritarians consolidate their power through incremental, legalistic means.⁷ A separate body of work suggests that the military can directly intervene, support or take a passive stance or resist autocratization efforts, but it does not theorize the repurposing of the military as a key instrument of governance.⁸ Militarization developed in Indonesia not because of pressure from the armed forces but because the Jokowi administration turned to the military as a convenient tool for civilian policy delivery,⁹ a trend that gained further momentum while Prabowo served as defence minister between 2019 and 2024. To gain the support of the military, Jokowi cultivated military commanders with personal or patronage ties to him.¹⁰ Yet efforts to control the military through such personal means, or by counterbalancing its power, are generally understood to weaken it institutionally.¹¹

What distinguishes command politics is that it does the opposite: it strengthens the military as an institution while binding it in personal subordination to the president, repurposing it as a central instrument of civilian governance. It is a combination that neither the literature on autocratization nor that on militarization anticipates, which is what makes the Prabowo administration somewhat unique. For instance, in Türkiye, President Recep Tayyip

Erdoğan subordinated the military to his personal control but did so by purging and weakening it.¹² In Egypt, the military plays a key role in state-led capitalism under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi but remains an autonomous corporate actor.¹³ By comparison, Prabowo has institutionally strengthened the military yet kept it subordinate to his rule. Through a top-down command structure and unity of purpose, command politics has enabled the rapid consolidation of presidential authority and the large-scale mobilization of manpower and resources for presidential initiatives. The clearest example of this was the establishment, within just one year, of 19,000 kitchens nationwide to roll out Prabowo's signature free meals programme, which involved a very significant and visible military involvement. The administration plans to establish 750 new military battalions by 2029 to spearhead Prabowo's ambitious food self-sufficiency goals and other priority agendas.

Yet while command politics is effective at large-scale mobilization, it also generates pathologies that degrade governance quality. Despite unprecedented political consolidation and elite alignment, Prabowo's presidency has been marked by repeated governance failures. The flagship free meals programme has been marred by mass food poisoning incidents, while the government's response to a devastating natural disaster in Sumatra was widely criticized as slow and poorly coordinated. By mid-2026, these difficulties were overtaken by a graver one. The *rupiah*, the national currency, fell to a record low against the US dollar, and foreign investors withdrew from Indonesian markets. The *Economist* warned that the president was "too spendthrift and too authoritarian", jeopardizing both the economy and democracy. The central argument of this article follows from this paradox. Command politics produces political dominance and governance failure as two sides of the same coin because the same mechanisms that consolidate presidential power also disable the correctives on which effective governance depends. In concentrating authority so completely, command politics introduces a single point of failure into the system: a system that executes efficiently when the president's judgement is sound but prone to failures when it is not.

Data presented in this article are drawn from interviews with politicians, government officials and parliamentary staff conducted during fieldwork in Jakarta in 2025, as well as from Indonesian-language news articles and video sources. All sources are anonymized.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section examines the foundations of command politics: how the imposition of political control over coalition parties and the empowerment of a narrow inner circle of loyalists replaced intra-elite bargaining with top-down control, securing the political and administrative conditions for presidential rule. The second section turns to the militarization of governance, the core of command politics, tracing both the militarized ethos and the institutional repurposing of the armed forces. The third section demonstrates how command politics generates the pathologies that undermine effective governance. The fourth section examines the tension between resilience and fragility that is the central challenge for the Prabowo presidency. It concludes by examining the longer-term viability of command politics as a mode of governance and assessing its effects on Indonesia's political landscape.

The Foundations of Command Politics: Political Control and Empowering Key Loyalists

In the conventional understanding of Indonesian politics, governance is carried out through intra-elite bargaining and negotiated power-sharing. During the presidencies of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–14) and Jokowi, the management of large parliamentary coalitions followed what Marcus Mietzner describes as the “give-and-take spirit” of coalitional presidentialism, in which presidents deployed a broad “toolbox” to attract, accommodate and co-opt political actors with potential veto powers.¹⁴ According to Dan Slater, patronage politics was characterized by a “complicated, multilateral bargaining process” among relatively autonomous political actors, with the distribution of patronage functioning as the central mechanism sustaining cooperation between political parties and state bodies.¹⁵ By his second term in office, Jokowi had developed a more sophisticated system of rewards and punishments that balanced legal pressure against independent-minded politicians with concessions to those willing to toe the line and work with him.¹⁶

Yet Indonesia's patronage politics always maintained a certain dynamism. Under Yudhoyono's administration, coalition partners publicly criticized government policy and were free to make their own political decisions.¹⁷ During Jokowi's presidency, however, the space for autonomy narrowed considerably, although coalition partners could still negotiate the terms of their support and resist the president on specific issues, such as Jokowi's choice of running

mate for the 2019 elections.¹⁸ Mietzner's assessment of coalition dynamics in the Jokowi era highlighted that the president cut deals with elites by protecting areas of governance important to him, such as infrastructure development, but surrendering other areas to his coalition partners.¹⁹ Jokowi's system also remained fundamentally ad hoc and informal; elite compliance was anchored in a desire by officials and politicians to benefit from Jokowi's electoral popularity,²⁰ while Jokowi successfully implemented divide-and-rule.²¹

Command politics, as practised by Prabowo, is both an intensification of trends that began under Jokowi and a qualitative shift in how presidential dominance is asserted. Many of its instruments, such as legal pressure on vulnerable politicians and the distribution of patronage to bring opposition parties into line, were in use during the second Jokowi administration. What distinguishes Prabowo's rule is not the invention of these instruments but their systematization and the contraction of residual party autonomy. Under Prabowo, the boundaries of acceptable discourse and public expressions of coalitional loyalty have become more formalized and routinely enforced. In March 2026, for instance, General Muhammad Sarmuji, the general secretary of Golkar, a coalition party, articulated four norms of politeness that party members had to adhere to. This included a prohibition on Golkar lawmakers from attacking the government's policies or challenging the coalition's decisions.²² Sarmuji told party members to adhere to a specific communication style based on "constructive evaluations that are accompanied by solutions".²³ To further mark Golkar's obeisance, Sarmuji requested that Bambang Hariyadi, the secretary of the Gerindra parliamentary faction who was attending the event, convey Golkar's political message to Prabowo.²⁴ (Prabowo is chairman of the Gerindra party.) The political symbolism of Sarmuji's words is clear: coalition loyalty means full alignment with outcomes determined by the president, and any criticism must be polite and framed constructively.

Coalition parties' structural dependence on access to cabinet positions also reinforces their subservience to the presidency. Seven out of the eight parties in the Indonesian parliament are part of the government coalition, representing 81 per cent of the seats. This dependence was well illustrated by a politician, who explained that being outside the government meant losing "access to government projects and placements in state-owned enterprises".²⁵ Control of ministries is also crucial to sustaining party operations and supporting party cadres. For instance, both the Ministry of Villages and the

Ministry of Population employ thousands of village and population assistants, who are led by coalition ministers. These assistant positions are filled by party cadres from coalition parties, providing resources to sustain a network of grateful cadres to mobilize support for the next elections.²⁶ Yet ministerial office is a double-edged sword. The unfortunate case of former Golkar Chairman Airlangga Hartarto, who was threatened with corruption proceedings during the Jokowi era unless he resigned from his chairmanship, was a case in point.²⁷ The “legacy of fear” from that period and the patronage benefits generated by being in government continue to condition parties’ compliance with presidential directives.²⁸ Under Prabowo, this trend has intensified, with the party chairmen of almost all coalition parties serving in government (see Table 1). Political office simultaneously increases dependence on presidential favour and exposes political actors to potential administrative and legal vulnerabilities, further motivating party leaders to toe the line.

Table 1
Party Chairmen and Their Positions in Cabinet

Party Chairmen	Positions in Cabinet
Zulkifli Hasan (National Mandate Party, or PAN)	• Coordinating Minister for Food Affairs • Five other ministerial positions and one vice-ministerial position to party cadres
Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono (Democrat Party)	• Coordinating Minister for Infrastructure and Regional Development • Three other ministerial positions and three vice-ministerial positions to party cadres
Bahlil Lahadalia (Golkar)	• Minister for Energy and Mineral Resources • Seven other ministerial positions and three vice-ministerial positions to party cadres
Muhaimin Iskandar (National Awakening Party, or PKB)	• Coordinating Minister for People Empowerment • Two vice-ministerial positions to party cadres

Source: Compiled by the author.

The Prabowo administration's ability to enforce political control over coalition parties was most visible when coalition discipline was tested over a politically consequential decision. In December 2025, a public debate erupted over proposals to replace direct regional elections with indirect elections conducted by regional parliaments. The goal, according to party leaders, was to reduce the cost of organizing elections. Golkar Chairman Bahlil Lahadalia convened a meeting at his residence with Muhaimin Iskandar, chairman of the National Awakening Party (PKB), and Zulkifli Hasan, chairman of the National Mandate Party (PAN), to discuss his proposal. The proposal was subsequently endorsed by Sugiono, Gerindra's secretary general, after news of the meeting came to light in the mainstream media.²⁹ It was clear that the party leaders were acting on the president's instructions since Prabowo had publicly declared his support for such reforms almost a year earlier.³⁰ The Democrat Party, another coalition party with cabinet representation, was conspicuously absent from those discussions, and in one of the rare instances of public disagreement among coalition parties, it initially rejected the proposal.³¹ The disagreement was short-lived. Just two weeks later, the Democrat Party changed tack, emphasizing that it would "close ranks" (*satu barisan*) with Prabowo to support indirect elections.³² According to a Democrat politician interviewed after this reversal, the shift was not the product of internal party deliberation. Instead, Prabowo had made clear an "implicit threat: if you are not with us, you are out of government".³³ The episode crystallizes the logic of command politics. The Democratic Party had good reason to oppose the proposal. Yudhoyono, the party's chairman until 2020, had defended direct elections during his presidency, and the proposal was unpopular with the public.³⁴ But structural incentives created by patronage dependence and reinforced by the implicit threat of exclusion proved decisive.

Taken together, these dynamics mark a shift in the basis of coalition management from the horizontal bargaining of the Yudhoyono and Jokowi administrations towards top-down political control. What distinguishes the Prabowo administration from the ad hoc management of the Jokowi era is the enforcement of normative compliance, structural dependence and circumscribed limits to party autonomy. Weaponized dependence through the threat of legal action, a legacy of the Jokowi era, has reinforced these dynamics. As a senior politician from a coalition party highlighted, the fear of intervention by a "higher authority" has resulted in "full obedience by political parties".³⁵

The Empowerment of Key Loyalists

If command politics secured political support for the president's agenda, Prabowo has relied on a small handful of loyalists in his inner circle to extend his control and direct both the executive and legislative branches to secure his legislative and budgetary objectives. In practice, command politics begins with the president himself, reflected in a leadership style that emphasizes compliance and obedience to presidential instructions. Prabowo's former subordinates in the Defence Ministry (he was the defence minister between 2019 and 2024) argue that when Prabowo gives someone a task, the person is expected to follow his direction. Prabowo does not want someone to tell him that "something cannot be done".³⁶

Prabowo's instructions are transmitted through a narrow inner circle that controls access and directs implementation across the government. Two figures are central: Teddy Indra Wijaya, the cabinet secretary, and Prasetyo Hadi, the state secretary. Both constantly accompany Prabowo and attend almost all cabinet meetings. Together, they function as a dual gatekeeping mechanism, controlling and filtering what information reaches him. Teddy manages the president's schedule, organizes ministerial attendance at limited cabinet meetings and determines who can meet Prabowo and what information reaches his ears. More importantly, he plays a key role in conveying the president's instructions and monitoring the progress of priority initiatives with cabinet ministers.³⁷

Prasetyo acts as Prabowo's behind-the-scenes operator. As state secretary, he oversees the clearing house for all key government documents, ministerial reports, presidential briefs and other administrative correspondence. In general, ministers are directed to communicate with the State Secretariat, and Prasetyo determines which issues are elevated to the president's attention.³⁸ Prasetyo's most consequential role has been in fiscal management. When Prabowo sought to push through his ambitious budget-efficiency plan to achieve 306 trillion rupiah (US\$18 billion) in savings in early 2025, the plan faced resistance from key bureaucrats in the Finance Ministry. Prasetyo intervened directly, working to ensure that the presidential instruction on budget efficiency produced the desired level of cuts that Prabowo wanted.³⁹ His role in fiscal management has since deepened. Following the 2025 budget efficiency plan, the State Secretariat instructed all ministries to set aside a special line item or standby fund for their 2026 budgets, and the funds may be tapped only with the State Secretariat's approval.

The purpose of this standby fund is to ensure funding is available for any unplanned government expenditures directed by Prabowo.⁴⁰ Functionally, the State Secretariat is an administrative office with no oversight authority over the state budget. Yet empowering a key loyalist to assert influence over the Finance Ministry demonstrates how personalized presidential control imposes compliance over the rest of the executive branch on matters relating to presidential priorities.

Prabowo's personalized control extends into parliament through Sufmi Dasco, the deputy speaker of the House of Representatives (DPR) and the executive chairman of Gerindra. Dasco wields authority far beyond his formal role. According to an interviewee, "all legislative and supervisory functions in the DPR cannot move without Dasco's approval".⁴¹ Dasco has consolidated his influence in parliament through a combination of financial resources, a network of proteges in parliamentary commissions and close links with the police, forged over a decade of relationship-building in the parliament's Legal Commission.⁴² In one notable case, Prabowo sought to implement a budget-efficiency plan after the 2025 fiscal allocations had been approved. To push the amendments through, Dasco unilaterally postponed parliamentary discussions on the state budget in February 2025 while ministries recalculated the proposed budgets.⁴³ When the budget amendments were submitted to the DPR, parliamentary commissions were instructed to pass the amendments quickly. According to one interviewee, when the chair of one parliamentary commission (not a Gerindra member) was asked by lawmakers why they had so little time to question government representatives, the chair replied: "Dasco's order".⁴⁴ This underscores how the DPR's capacity for independent scrutiny has been hollowed out: it has effectively lost the ability to check the executive on matters the president prioritizes.

It is true that the imposition of political control and the empowerment of key loyalists to assert control over the legislative and executive branches have clear Jokowi-era antecedents. However, the demand for coalition discipline and the reliance on key loyalists to enforce compliance with Prabowo's instructions through the legislative and executive branches reflect the military-inflected nature of command politics under Prabowo. Command politics generates budgetary and legislative authorizations that the president's agenda requires and concentrates power in the hands of the president and his inner circle. This provides the backdrop for the military's growing role in civilian development programmes.

The Militarization of Governance

Under his administration, Prabowo has increasingly turned to the armed forces to provide the organizational capacity to implement his priority programmes and has imbued his administration with a military ethos. This militarization rests on the foundations explained in the section above. But Prabowo's governing philosophy distinguishes him from his predecessors.

The first element of this philosophy stems from Prabowo's suspicion and mistrust of the civilian bureaucracy, which he views as an obstructionist actor that must be reined in. For instance, in February 2025, Prabowo alluded to the "little kings" (*raja kecil*) in the bureaucracy who opposed his drive for budget efficiency.⁴⁵ Taking up a similar theme, in May 2026, Prabowo warned of a "deep state" working against his administration's priorities and called on his ministers to ensure that bureaucrats fell into line.⁴⁶

The second element of his philosophy is the military's strategic role in Indonesia's national development. As a former military general in the Suharto era (1967–98), Prabowo spent the bulk of his military career in the army's elite special forces during a period when the military asserted a powerful role in Indonesia's politics and society. While he served as defence minister from 2019 to 2024, Prabowo led the Jokowi administration's food estate project to achieve domestic food self-sufficiency. Prabowo's instincts to reach for the military as a governing instrument reflect that background. He believes that the military is the remedy for Indonesia's developmental problems, as it is an "effective instrument that he can control and support his agenda".⁴⁷ Defence Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin provided the clearest articulation for this view when, speaking to parliament in May 2026, he described the military as a "safety belt" to secure the success of the "people's transformation strategy", encompassing food and energy self-sufficiency and the administration's other priority initiatives.⁴⁸ It is a framing that casts the armed forces as a permanent guarantor of Prabowo's agenda.

Prabowo's interest in strengthening the military role in civilian development predates the presidency. As defence minister, Prabowo and his team drafted a revision of the Law on the Indonesian Military (TNI law) that would have granted the president full discretion to appoint military personnel to civilian ministries.⁴⁹ Although this amendment was not passed by parliament in 2025, Prabowo's administration has since appointed about 60 former and current military personnel to government roles and to the leadership

boards of state-owned enterprises.⁵⁰ The revised TNI law in 2025 also strengthened the role of the defence minister by eliminating an earlier, more ambiguous formulation, placing defence policy firmly “within the coordination of the minister”.⁵¹ In conjunction with Sjafrie’s closeness with Prabowo and a former military general in his own right, in practice, this makes the defence minister more influential than the Commander of the Indonesian National Armed Forces.⁵² Personalized control runs through Defence Minister Sjafrie (Prabowo’s “best friend” from his days in the military) and Vice-Commander of the armed forces Tandyo Budi Revita, who served under Prabowo when he was defence minister.

The militarized ethos has become institutionalized in two new institutions created by the Prabowo administration: the National Nutrition Agency (BGN) and the development battalions. The BGN manages Prabowo’s flagship free meals programme. As Table 2 shows, a significant number of high-ranking positions in BGN are held by former and current military officers, thereby facilitating military involvement in the free meals programme.

Table 2
List of Positions in BGN Occupied by Former Military Personnel

Key Positions in the National Nutrition Agency (BGN)	Name
Vice-Head of BGN	Major-General (retired) Trenggono ⁵³
Deputy for Monitoring & Oversight of BGN	Major-General (retired) Dadang Hendra Yuda
Senior Secretary BGN	Brigadier-General (retired) Sarwono
Senior Inspector BGN	Brigadier-General (retired) Jimmy Alexander Adirman
Deputy for Provision and Supply of BGN	Brigadier-General (retired) Suardi Samiran

Source: Various media sources.

The programme illustrates what command politics achieves when its mechanisms operate together. Civilian loyalists secured the funds for the programme by reallocating the state budget and securing parliamentary approval, which almost quadrupled the programme’s budget allocation from 71 trillion rupiah (US\$4 billion) in 2025 to 268 trillion rupiah (US\$15 billion) in 2026. Afterwards, the

military spearheaded its execution. Within the first year of the Prabowo administration, 30,000 university graduates underwent two months of military training and one month of managerial training at military bases across Indonesia to serve as kitchen managers.⁵⁴ By the end of 2025, around 19,000 kitchens had been constructed with private capital and investor funding, with the state budget funding staff wages and the cost of each food portion.⁵⁵ The Indonesian military set aside roughly 600 locations in military bases to establish kitchens in early 2025, with plans to expand to 2,000 kitchens.⁵⁶ This constituted a massive logistical endeavour, in which the military was involved at every stage, from the procurement of foodstuffs and the distribution of meals to the monitoring of implementation.⁵⁷

In addition, the Prabowo administration's development battalions (formally called "territorial development infantry battalions") extend the same logic from a single programme to the reorganizing and repurposing of the military institution for civilian development tasks. While they are formally combat battalions, each development battalion consists of specialized companies dedicated to civilian tasks such as agriculture, animal husbandry, healthcare and construction. During the same parliamentary hearing in May 2026, Defence Minister Sjafrie explained that the battalions have been equipped with tractors and excavators, as well as seeds and fertilizers from regional governments, to support local development efforts. The battalions also help to provide health services to the local population and organize regular patrols to reduce the incidence of crime.⁵⁸ They constitute a standing quick-response force that can be deployed for disaster relief, support for local government and the president's priority programmes.

The initiative calls for 750 new battalions to be built by 2029, with 150 established each year across the archipelago.⁵⁹ By early 2026, 155 battalions had been established, prioritizing Papua and the outer islands.⁶⁰ In addition, another 150 development battalions will be established in 2026, with the goal of establishing at least one battalion in every administrative region on Java island by the end of the year.⁶¹ Concurrently, efforts are underway to establish a Military Regional Command (Kodam) in every province. With each development battalion reporting to a Kodam commander, this will facilitate top-down command and control from Jakarta.

Reliance on the military for civilian tasks is not itself new. Under Jokowi, numerous agreements were signed for the military to assist civilian agencies.⁶² During the COVID-19 pandemic, it

was deployed for top-down testing and vaccination.⁶³ Jokowi also embedded military officers into civilian government as technocratic actors, providing employment for both surplus and retired personnel. This form of “technocratic containment” increased informal military influence within civilian institutions while consolidating executive authority and the loyalty of the military elite, but there is no larger shift towards militarization.⁶⁴ However, what distinguishes the Prabowo administration is its construction of permanent institutional infrastructure amenable to presidential control. The envisioned 750 new development battalions and a reconstructed territorial command embed the military’s role in civilian development programmes as a standing feature of the state, as well as persistent (rather than ad hoc) civilian policy delivery through the free meals programme.

As the military is most amenable to command politics’ preference for hierarchy, obedience and disciplined execution, the Prabowo administration has strengthened and repurposed it as an instrument of presidential rule. This is also not a return to the military’s dual function (*dwifungsi*) during the Suharto era, in which it played a dominant role in both politics and security. Instead, the repurposed military, under Prabowo, is not autonomous but personally subordinate to the president, and it is embedded not in formal political representation but in the role of civilian policy delivery. The militarization of governance reflects the full alignment and disciplined execution that command politics demands of the political system, but it has also produced very significant consequences, which we now turn to.

Command Politics and Its Governance Costs

The preceding sections have demonstrated the capacity of command politics to impose political control over coalition parties, empower key loyalists to direct the executive and legislative branches and to institutionalize militarized governance by repurposing the Indonesian military. By imposing this singular unified command structure and unity of purpose, it has enabled the rapid consolidation of presidential authority and the large-scale mobilization of manpower and resources for presidential initiatives. As a former Defence Ministry official explained, “it has never happened before in Indonesia that an organization of 30,000 people [the BGN] can be put together so quickly”.⁶⁵

Yet command politics also generates its own pathologies. Hierarchy, obedience and disciplined execution might mean that

decision-making and implementation are fast and effective, but “if the direction is wrong nobody dares to say anything”.⁶⁶ In particular, command politics systematically disables the error-correction mechanisms on which all government depend. Technocratic deliberation is weakened in favour of hierarchy, obedience and disciplined execution, and top-down control stifles feedback mechanisms that assist effective decision-making. The result is that error-correction mechanisms are dysfunctional, producing significant governance failures.

This is most apparent in Prabowo's free meals programme. By May 2026, the Health Ministry had reported almost 37,000 cases of food poisoning linked to the programme since January 2025.⁶⁷ Multiple factors contribute to the programme's persistent problems. The first lies in its design. When it was being planned, senior officials at the Ministry of National Planning advocated that the incoming Prabowo administration adopt a decentralized model in which schools receive additional state funding to source nutritious food for their children, thereby benefitting local businesses and involving parents in oversight. Moreover, a supervisory team appointed by the central government would monitor the programme's implementation, with rollout prioritizing the poorest provinces.⁶⁸ Such a decentralized model would reduce the distance between food suppliers and schoolchildren, with parental involvement providing an incentive to maintain food quality and safety. An additional benefit is that it would reduce costs; it was estimated that 20 trillion rupiah (US\$1 billion) could be saved with a decentralized model, as there would be no need to set up a new organization to manage the free meals programme.⁶⁹

The second problem was that the programme has been carried out without adequate safeguards. Central kitchens were built and issued permits to serve students before they began operating, and safety guidelines had not been issued. Presidential Regulation No. 115/2025 on the Management of the Free Meals Programme was only signed by Prabowo on 17 November 2025, almost a year after the programme began. Indeed, only in late 2025 did the government establish the rules for the programme's management, including its food-safety guarantees, risk-based oversight and the protocol for handling suspected poisoning incidents. In the interim, kitchens were built and licensed to serve students without a framework in place. Only 34 of 8,583 central kitchens held a hygiene and sanitation certificate issued by the Ministry of Health in October 2025.⁷⁰ In addition, as the hastily run programme lacked adequate financial

controls and monitoring, public procurement data highlighted wasteful spending of public funds allocated to the free meals programme on overpriced motorcycles, tablets and clothing.⁷¹ Key figures in BGN have since been arrested on corruption charges, including BGN chief Dadan Hindayana.

As such, both the programme's design and implementation highlight a core pathology of command politics. An alternative existed inside the system, but it was overridden specifically because of command politics' preference for top-down control. The centralized model was premised on a mistrust of schools or parents to meet the programme's policy objectives in a decentralized model, as well as blind faith that military organizational culture premised on hierarchy, obedience and disciplined execution is better suited for civilian development programmes.⁷² The organization of the programme was problematic from the outset, with the administrators hiring large numbers of fresh graduates with no relevant expertise in food preparation or food safety to serve as kitchen managers.⁷³ It prioritized execution and implementation, resulting in the programme being implemented without proper food safety or financial safeguards.

The Prabowo administration's handling of the natural disaster in Aceh and North Sumatra in late November 2025 revealed another pathology of command politics. On 25 November, heavy rainfall driven by Tropical Cyclone Senyar struck large areas of western Indonesia. Massive floods, exacerbated by rampant deforestation, devastated entire regions.⁷⁴ The floods destroyed bridges, cropland, homes and killed over 1,000 people. The disaster did not arrive without warning. Indeed, Indonesia's Meteorology Agency had made repeated warnings about heavy rainfall in Sumatra.⁷⁵ Despite these warnings, the central government took no preparatory action. The Prabowo administration only held its first disaster management meeting on 27 November, two days after the cyclone struck, during which Prabowo instructed all agencies to deploy resources to the affected areas.

The response itself demonstrated that Prabowo was poorly briefed. He had instructed the head of the National Disaster Management Agency, General Suharyanto, to evacuate affected populations and conduct "weather modification operations" to reduce the rainfall.⁷⁶ Cloud seeding and similar techniques could help manage normal rainfall patterns, but they cannot mitigate heavy rainfall associated with a tropical cyclone. That Prabowo issued this instruction suggests that either his subordinates had failed to brief him on

the nature of the weather event or were unwilling to correct his understanding. The subsequent response deepened the impression of an administration operating without adequate situational awareness. Suharyanto provoked public outrage when he told reporters that the floods “looked serious on social media, but when we reached the locations, the rain had stopped”.⁷⁷ It was only when Defence Minister Sjafrie, one of the few figures with direct access to Prabowo, visited Aceh on 29 November that the full scale of the disaster was acknowledged, and Prabowo arranged to visit the disaster areas on 1 December.⁷⁸

The Sumatra disaster response highlighted that command politics' preference for top-down control had consequences for government effectiveness. First, ministers were afraid to act without direct presidential instruction. As one interviewee observed, “Ministers only visited Sumatra after Sjafrie went to Sumatra. They were worried about pre-empting the president (*takut dianggap mendahului presiden*).”⁷⁹ Second, ordinary feedback mechanisms, as well as the provision of timely and accurate information, were dysfunctional, impeding effective decision-making and a more rapid government response.⁸⁰ As a result, the natural disaster demonstrated how command politics amplified governance failures by disabling corrective mechanisms, while the system's dependence on presidential instruction affected response times to fast-moving crises.

Taken together, the free meals programme and the Sumatra disaster revealed the pathologies generated by command politics. In the first, command politics disabled correction at the design stage. A workable alternative existed within the system but was overridden in favour of centralized militarized control. In the second, it disabled correction at the stage of execution, as the demand for alignment and the fear of pre-empting Prabowo's instruction suppressed the timely flow of information and rapid responses that a fast-moving crisis required. In both cases, the failure was the product of a system that had removed the technocratic deliberation and upward flow of information through which such errors are normally caught and corrected.

Command Politics and Its Fragility

Despite repeated and serious governance failures, the Prabowo administration suffered no meaningful political consequences. The administration's resilience so far is striking, given the scale of discontent it weathered. The Dark Indonesia protests (#IndonesiaGelap)

in February and March 2025 mobilized students and civil society against the budget efficiency cuts and the planned revision of the TNI bill. The protests of 25 to 30 August, triggered by revelations that lawmakers had voted to give themselves increased housing allowances amid a difficult economic situation, were the largest mobilization of protestors since the fall of Suharto in 1998.⁸¹ Following the 2025 protests, student-led protests across multiple cities in June 2026 demanded that the free meals programme be halted, for the government to lower the prices of food and fuel and to end militarism in the civilian sphere. Yet none of these public protests produced elite defection or meaningful policy reversal. The administration's core policy agenda, such as the free meals programme, fiscal recentralization and development battalions, remained intact. No coalition party broke ranks, participated in the protests or directly challenged the president's agenda.

The reasons lie in the mechanisms documented in the preceding sections. Coalition parties are locked into full alignment with the administration's agenda by a combination of coalition discipline, normative compliance and the structural dependence created by cabinet positions. Presidential dominance is complete in all but the most extreme circumstances. As one senior politician admitted, it is "hard for political parties to bail out on Prabowo", except for a "situation like [the] 1998 [economic crisis] when there is little reasoning to support the president anymore".⁸² Where lock-in does not suffice, repression raises the cost of dissent. In 2025, a Finance Ministry official who criticized the appointment of military figures to the ministry was attacked by unknown assailants.⁸³ Security forces have also worked proactively to forestall and discourage new demonstrations. For instance, in the run-up to the 2026 May Day celebrations, the police worked to dissuade labour activists from organizing a separate protest from the main ceremonial event at Monas.⁸⁴ These conditions have made it harder to be vocally critical or to sustain civil society mobilization.

Yet cracks are appearing just below the surface. The administration looks increasingly fragile in 2026 as the economic situation continues to deteriorate. The first and most serious vulnerability is fiscal. Prabowo has committed his administration to continuing the hugely expensive free meals programme amid rising oil prices because of the conflict in Iran. With the administration absorbing the cost of higher oil prices through subsidies, the fiscal deficit almost breached the legal limit of 3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2025. In the first quarter of 2026, the fiscal deficit reached 0.93 per

cent of GDP, double that of the same period in 2025.⁸⁵ Underscored by growing concerns about the government's fiscal credibility, the rupiah has continued to weaken while job layoffs have grown significantly. The administration is caught between a rock and a hard place, unable to raise fuel prices for fear of a knock-on effect on consumers and unwilling to pare down its signature free meals programme.

The second vulnerability is political. The nature of elite alignment sustained by command politics is primarily opportunistic. Behind the public performance of loyalty, coalition parties continue to secure access to state resources while preparing for alternative political scenarios. According to a politician from a coalition party, "Gerindra has very complete power and authority. [We] know that we cannot fight Gerindra now; we need to bide our time."⁸⁶ Parties comply because the costs of visible dissent outweigh the benefits, not because they have internalized Prabowo's agenda as their own. Such compliance is contingent on the president continuing to appear to be a winning proposition. An economic crisis, by eroding both the president's authority and the patronage that rewards loyalty, is precisely the kind of development capable of shifting that calculation.

The third vulnerability is the single point of failure inherent in the concentration of authority. The hierarchy, obedience and disciplined execution that allow command politics to mobilize at speed also strip away the technocratic deliberation and upward flow of information that enable a government to detect and correct its mistakes. In a crisis that demands rapid and accurate course correction, it is far more dangerous. The Sumatra disaster offered a preview. Subordinates either could not or would not correct the president's misunderstanding of the situation, and the response suffered as a result.

A perfect storm of a troubled geopolitical environment, economic mismanagement and longer-term internal challenges has created a situation in which a reckoning with these contradictions seems likely to come sooner rather than later. Thus far, the concentration of authority produced by command politics has meant that no organized elite faction is positioned to defect first. However, without recognition of the underlying challenges and concrete steps to address them, the economic deterioration now underway is likely to continue, fermenting greater discontent. With Prabowo saying that "I don't need pessimists around me" and his seeming unwillingness

to recognize fundamental problems in how his administration has approached economic management, the prospect of a soft landing looks increasingly dim.⁸⁷

Conclusion

Command politics reflects the importation of the “military way” into Indonesian politics, governance and society, representing an internally coherent mode of presidential governance. By imposing a singular unified command structure and unity of purpose in a multiparty system, it has enabled the rapid consolidation of presidential authority and the large-scale mobilization of manpower and resources for presidential initiatives. As noted, it represents a significant departure from the horizontal patronage politics that had defined elite politics in Indonesia since the 2000s, moving away from the ad hoc coalition management of the Jokowi era to a distinctive form of top-down political control. Both top-down political control and the empowerment of key loyalists have antecedents in Jokowi’s administrations, but command politics brings a military-inflected character that demands both coalition discipline and compliance with presidential priorities. While it partially reflects the specific character of the Prabowo presidency, it represents a model of executive centralization with applicability for future presidents seeking to direct and mobilize state resources for their priority agendas.

Of the changes command politics has wrought, the militarization of governance is the most consequential and the most durable. It marks a significant shift from Jokowi’s ad hoc reliance on the military to assist civilian agencies and consolidate power. Instead, command politics strengthens and repurposes the military as a standing instrument of presidential authority. It creates institutional facts that will outlast the Prabowo presidency. By building a sprawling military apparatus across the country that is highly responsive to presidential control, the administration has entrenched the military’s role as a persistent provider of civilian policy delivery and consolidated its long-term place in civilian development. A future president will find it difficult to reverse, and may well find the same infrastructure tempting to deploy to their own priorities. What began as the instrument of one president’s agenda may become a long-standing feature of Indonesia’s governance.

The administration has remained resilient so far, but the deteriorating economic situation will increasingly strain both public

support and the elite consensus that underpins political stability in Indonesia. Command politics have created a system that is highly effective at enforcing unified command and producing unchecked presidential power, but it has also created a single point of failure. Its viability depends on the president, who is at the apex of the system, consistently making good decisions. While the system is heavily reliant on providing timely and accurate intelligence to help the president make good decisions, command politics disables the technocratic deliberation and feedback mechanisms needed for sound decision-making. Ministerial initiatives crucial to presidential interests are suppressed, power is overly concentrated in a narrow inner circle, and technocratic and bureaucratic counsel are not systematically incorporated into decision-making. This contradiction at the heart of command politics is the largest stumbling block to its long-term viability.

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