



# THE INDONESIAN MILITARY ENJOYS STRONG PUBLIC TRUST AND SUPPORT

**Reasons and Implications**

Burhanuddin Muhtadi

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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# **The Indonesian Military Enjoys Strong Public Trust and Support: Reasons and Implications**

By Burhanuddin Muhtadi

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Opinion polls in Indonesia have repeatedly shown that the Indonesian National Army (TNI) is the state institution that enjoys the highest level of public trust. This is not something that is exclusive to Indonesia, however; according to several studies, people around the world place a higher level of trust in their military than they do in other institutions.
- Even though there has been a surge of writing, both scholarly and non-scholarly, on this subject, there is a lack of information regarding the reasons why people put more faith in the military than in other institutions. Moreover, in Indonesia, public trust in the military has not been shaken despite the extensive anti-military campaigns that have been waged by the media and activists.
- Consistent with previous works, the findings of my September 2021 survey indicate that the TNI has continued to enjoy the highest level of public trust among state institutions when compared to other political and social institutions. The respondents are also of the opinion that the military has been acting in the public's best interests.
- Two of the five factors analysed as potential determinants of trust consistently and significantly explain the level of public trust in the TNI. First, respondents will have greater faith in the TNI the more they disagree with assertions that alleged human rights violations are the result of foreign interference or foreign fabrication. The public views human rights violations by the military as an unfinished internal reform task for the TNI; consequently, the public

expects the military not to deflect blame onto external parties. Professionalism is also a significant predictor of public trust and confidence in the TNI being at the vanguard of representing the people's interests.

- High levels of public trust in the military over the past few years have been followed by a rise in public support for a military government and strongman leaders. This trend occurs in the context of several worrisome factors, such as a reversal in the democratic consolidation process, President Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) lack of ideological commitment to democracy, and the growing involvement of the military in non-traditional roles.

# **The Indonesian Military Enjoys Strong Public Trust and Support: Reasons and Implications**

By Burhanuddin Muhtadi<sup>1</sup>

## **INTRODUCTION**

Scholars have long argued for the importance of public trust in institutions in the context of democratic consolidation. Gamson (1968, p. 42) argues that trust functions as the “creator of collective power” which allows state institutions to make decisions without using a violent approach or having to continuously get the specific approval of citizens for every decision. In the short term, public trust in governments could be the outcome of a long socialization process. In the longer term, however, as Mishler and Rose (1997) argue, trust must be earned; it is a public evaluation of institutions based on performance (Hirschman 1970). The military is no exception to this rule. In order for it to carry out its duties effectively, the military must gain high levels of public trust and confidence.

Opinion polls have consistently shown that the Indonesian National Army (Tentara Nasional Indonesia, TNI) is the most trusted public or state institution in Indonesia. This situation is not unique to Indonesia. Studies show that the military is generally trusted more than other institutions in many countries in the world; this is true in some Arabic countries (Lotito 2018), Russia (Burda 1999) and post-Communist European countries (Mishler and Rose 1997). Although there has been a

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burst of scholarly and non-scholarly writings on this topic, little is known about why the military is more trusted than other institutions. Even in the face of extensive anti-military campaigns in the media and by activists, public trust in the military remains surprisingly high. This article offers a systematic answer to fundamental questions about the sources and implications of public trust in the Indonesian military which have vexed scholars for many years.

The next section of this article provides a brief review of existing studies which have identified five potential sources of trust or distrust in the army: the prestige of military service; public perception of threat; weak civilian politicians; the level of human rights abuses of the army; and military professionalism. The third section describes my research design and survey findings to show that the Indonesian army is still perceived by the public as the most trusted state institution and the respondents believe that the military acts to represent the best interests of the public. The fourth section explains a series of possible explanations for why the army enjoys the highest ratio of trust to distrust among state institutions. The fifth section presents the determinants of public trust and confidence in the military. In the final section, the article discusses the implications of high levels of trust in the military for Indonesian democracy. It is found that the high levels of public trust in the military over the last few years have been followed by an increase in public support for a military government and strongman leaders. This trend occurs amidst several worrying factors, such as the reversal in the democratic consolidation process, the instinctive lack of ideological commitment towards democracy on display by President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), and the increasing involvement of the military outside its traditional roles. All self-reinforcing factors mentioned above bode ill for Indonesian democracy.

## **WHY IS THE MILITARY STILL MORE TRUSTED?**

Cross-national studies show signs of decline or stagnation of public trust in social and political institutions in the last few decades. Not only has trust in the parliament, political parties, judiciary, police or state

institutions decreased, but public confidence in social institutions such as the mass media, NGOs, corporations or banks has also suffered to some extent (Hill, Wong, and Gerras 2013). Interestingly, the military has at the same time been the notable exception to the general trend (ibid.). What accounts for this?

Not many scholars on civil-military relations have examined why the military has managed to retain public trust more than other branches of government and social institutions. In cases where this is considered, the issue has generally not been central to the main analysis. Among the few studies trying to explain the persistence of the military as among the most positively evaluated public institutions, five major factors have been identified: the prestige of military service; threat perceptions; weak civilian politicians; the level of human rights abuses committed by the military; and military professionalism.

The first factor regards the prestige of military service. The literature defines prestige as a complex and multifaceted social phenomenon, in which the public assesses the social significance and necessity of the armed forces, their activities and status, and the actual position servicemen hold in society (Burda 1999, p. 5). Elements associated with the prestige of military service include public interest in the military profession (Hodný 1998) and whether people associate military service with the honourable and courageous duty of protecting the motherland (Burda 1999, p. 6). The reputation of the military is often built through the glorification of the past (Mietzner 2011). In Indonesia, such persistent military self-glorification leads the military leader and its personnel to subscribe to a belief of a “sense of moral superiority as impartial guardians of the nation” (Croissant et al. 2010, p. 93).

The second factor concerns the link between threat perceptions and popular support of the armed forces (Kernic 2009; Graf 2019) and is based on the underlying assumption that “people who feel threatened should support institutions and policies the very purpose of which is to protect them from these threats” (Graf 2019, p. 3). For instance, in countries where the threat from terrorism is increasing, citizens tend to support anti-terrorism policies (Huddy et al. 2005). Individual perceptions of threats are more related to subjective security than objective security. While the former relates to the feeling of safety either

from real or imagined threats, the latter concerns the condition of being safe due to being protected from danger (Vileikiene and Janusauskiene 2016). Hence, the concept of subjective security involves perceptions of existential threats and responses to these threats.

The concept of subjective security can be associated with internal and external threats depending on the presence of threats both within and outside the country and also heavily influenced by the amount of news coverage on these threats in the mass media. Securitization theory may help to explain how the political threat is constructed and how it relates to societal acceptance of and support for various security initiatives. When the state and society concur that a threat exists and that an immediate response is necessary to neutralize it, the situation is said to have been securitized (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998). Securitization actors turn a problem into a security danger, replicate threats that are viewed favourably by the public, and pinpoint the political processes involved in creating (and reproducing) threat perception in ways that encourage specific types of intervention. It is anticipated that this conduct will influence public opinion and give securitization actors some form of excuse for enlisting the help of the state to stop the threat. Much of the literature on security claims that as the perceived threat rises, support for the military increases. The 2016 Arab Barometer, for instance, shows that the rise of regional insecurity in the Middle East (largely due to the grave threat posed by the Islamic State, ISIS) was followed by a spike in the level of trust in the military (most notably in Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Algeria) (Lotito 2018). Similarly, public trust in the national army increased in Lithuania amidst external military threats (Vileikiene and Janusauskiene 2016). The same holds true in Taiwan (Wang et al. 2021); as the perceived threat from China dominates media reports and social media conversations in the country, citizens reassess their long-held negative views of their armed forces.

Another explanation that potentially explains why the army continues to be the most admired public institution is the widespread perception that civilian politicians are weak. The literature on civil-military relations stresses the importance of the public and the military to accept civilian supremacy (Mietzner 2011; Croissant et al. 2010). As Feather

(2003, p. 6) puts it, “the military can describe in some detail the nature of the threat posed by a particular enemy, but only the civilian can decide whether to feel threatened and, if so, whether to respond. The military assesses the risk, the civilian judges it.” If a majority of the population holds extremely negative views of their civilian leaders and considers them to be weak, corrupt and incompetent, and at the same time believe that those who have served in the military are stronger, and much more superior and competent even in their civilian roles, then this can corrode civilian governance. In other words, the factor that contributes to high levels of public trust in the military can also potentially undermine civilian authority as the *sine qua non* in a liberal democracy.

The ostensible rise (and sustainment) of public trust in the military also consequently curb negative views of the armed forces, especially with regard to allegations of human rights abuses. The rationale is perceptible: With the rise of democratic regimes in many parts of the world since the 1970s, the armed forces have in turn disengaged themselves from domestic politics; this reduces interactions between soldiers and citizens, and thus the potential for human rights violations as well (Hill, Wong, and Gerras 2013). The smaller the potential for human rights violations being committed by the military, the more public trust in the armed forces will increase. The issue of human rights violations is commonplace in new democracies. Despite the shift from an authoritarian system to a democracy, many still doubt the military’s commitment to human rights. The military itself in responding to public scepticism and allegations of past human rights abuse oftentimes shifts attention by resorting to the narrative that it is merely foreign interference at work, seeking to discredit the military.

Lastly, the improvement of long-held negative views towards the military is also caused by the failure to carry out the professionalization of the military apparatus. In a democratic setting, trust in the armed forces is strongly influenced by how professional military officers are in performing their duties (Kasher 2003). The main indicator of military professionalism is that officers accept the idea of civilian supremacy; this means that they distance themselves from domestic politics, maintain an apolitical culture, reduce or terminate military representation in civilian government bodies, and improve parliamentary oversight of the military.

## **MEASURING PUBLIC TRUST IN THE ARMY**

In this section, I first measure the level of public trust in the Indonesian military for use as the dependent variable for this study. Using a standard survey question to examine public trust in political institutions, I demonstrate that public trust in the Indonesian army is comparatively high. By demonstrating the data trend from nationwide representative surveys conducted by Indikator Politik Indonesia (INDIKATOR), I found that the Indonesian military was consistently the highest-ranked institution when it comes to public trust in Indonesia over the period 2014–21.

I draw upon data from an original, nationally representative survey fielded on 17–21 September 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I had to rely on telephone calls to reach out to the respondents. The survey was administered by INDIKATOR, an independent polling institute (with the executive director being the author). I utilized a double sampling method to produce a sample that enabled inferences and generalizations about the national population without meeting the respondents in-person during a pandemic. First, from the population of Indonesian voters in thirty-four provinces, samples were drawn using multistage random sampling from the collection of INDIKATOR face-to-face survey samples from March 2018 to June 2021. Samples from those previous surveys were compiled into one database of samples. A total of 296,982 respondents randomly distributed throughout Indonesia had been interviewed in person, with a survey response rate of around 90 per cent. From these, I selected those who owned telephones or mobile phones; these constituted 71 per cent of the respondents.

Secondly, the stratified random sampling procedure was used for the selection of the sample with phone numbers, as follows: (1) the pooled random sample with phone numbers was selected to form strata that have proportionate representation from all thirty-four provinces, rural and urban areas, and gender categories; and (2) respondents were randomly selected from each stratum to be interviewed by phone. Of those respondents with telephone contacts, the number chosen randomly to be called was 7,250. The number of respondents who were successfully

interviewed was 1,200 people. The sample from the survey was validated through comparison with demographic data from the Indonesian Central Bureau of Statistics.<sup>2</sup>

I utilized two measurement methods to test the level of public trust in the TNI and other state institutions in the September 2021 survey. First, I used a standard question commonly employed for determining public trust level for several political/state institutions. The phrasing of the question goes like “We will mention several names of political/state institutions. Please state your level of trust in each of these institutions?”<sup>3</sup> As shown in Figure 1, the TNI is recorded as the most trusted institution out of the state institutions listed and asked of respondents, such as the president, the KPK, the police and political representative institutions such as the House of Representatives (Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat, DPR), Regional Representative Council (DPD), People’s Consultative Assembly (MPR) and political parties. The political representative institutions generally registered a low score in terms of public trust perception.

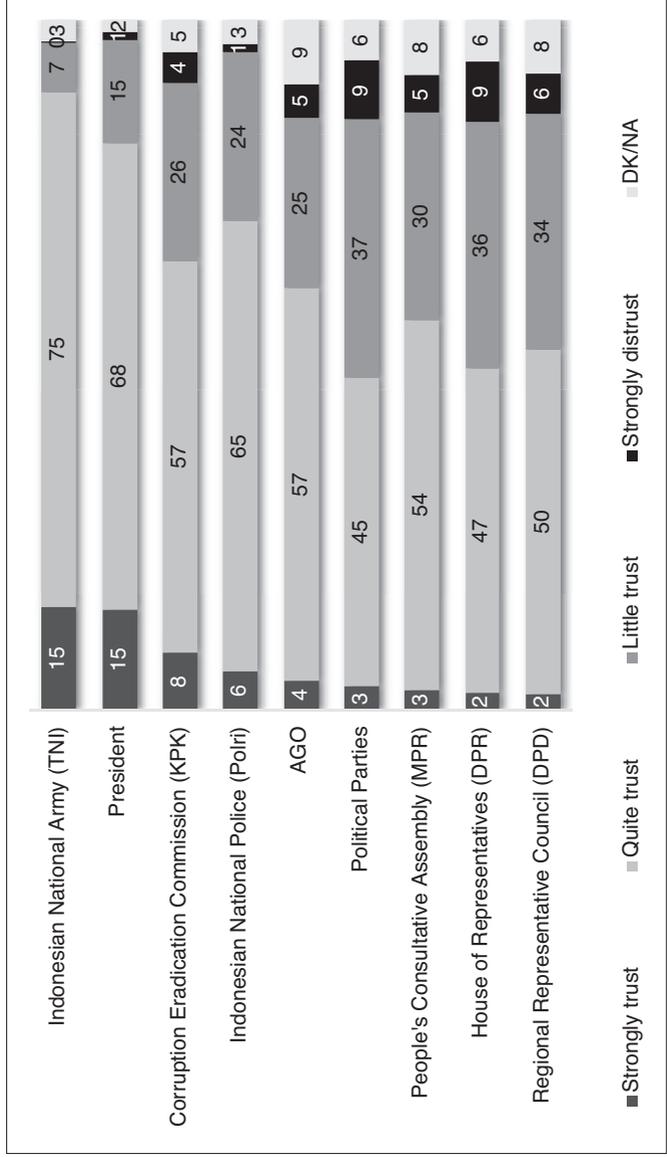
I then asked the question used by the Pew Research Center with the specific wording: “Of the several institutions below, how confident are you that the institution in doing something always prioritizes the interests of the wider community?”. As shown in Figure 2, 84.6 per cent of respondents strongly believed or quite believed that the TNI had acted in the people’s best interests. Once again, public confidence in the Indonesian police, for example, was still below that of the TNI. This time, I also include public confidence in two social institutions, namely the mass media and NGOs. As shown in Figure 2, the level of public confidence in the media and NGOs was far below that of the TNI. This high level of public confidence reflects how amidst mass media and NGOs’ human rights allegation assaults on the military, the general public still believed in the military.

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<sup>2</sup> If the sample showed a significant difference compared to the population, I would apply weighting to the data. This weighting is aimed at obtaining a comparable sample relative to the population for validation.

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to my senior colleague Professor Saiful Mujani for introducing this political trust measure in the case of Indonesia.

**Figure 1: The Level of Trust in Political Institutions, September 2021 (%)**



**Figure 2- Percentage Who Say They Have Confidence in Each Institution to Act in the Best Interests of the Public, September 2021**

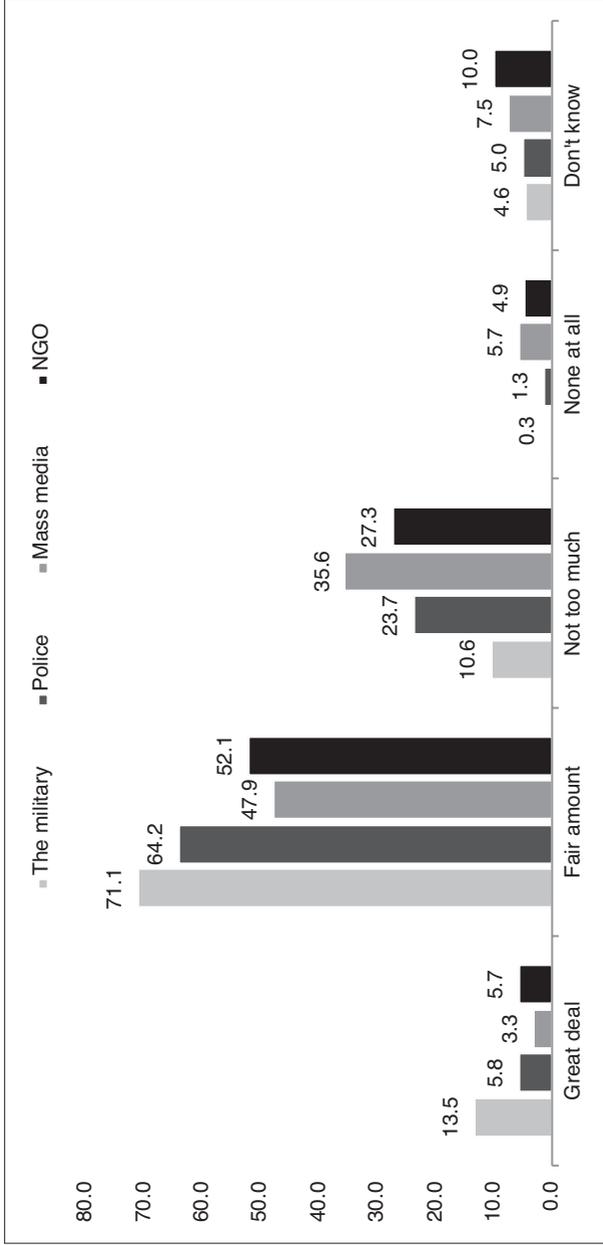


Figure 3 shows that the TNI has always emerged as the public's most-trusted institution since 2014. Only the President managed to consistently trail the TNI's level of trust. Other political institutions ranked far below the TNI, some of which have even had a trust level score below 50 per cent, such as the political parties and the parliament (DPR), not to mention the paltry trust level of 29 per cent felt towards politicians. Despite not being inquired about in every survey, the data also shows that trust in social institutions is also consistently eclipsed by the level of trust towards the TNI. For example, trust in NGOs in early 2019 was around 66 per cent, mass media (58.8 per cent), NU (80.5 per cent), Indonesian Ulema Council (81.6 per cent), and private companies (73.6). Not only did the INDIKATOR's survey find TNI to consistently be the most-admired public institution, but other credible surveys in Indonesia also identified the same pattern. So far, the reason for such a high level of public trust and confidence in the Indonesian military is still inconclusive, a mystery this article is hoping to unravel.

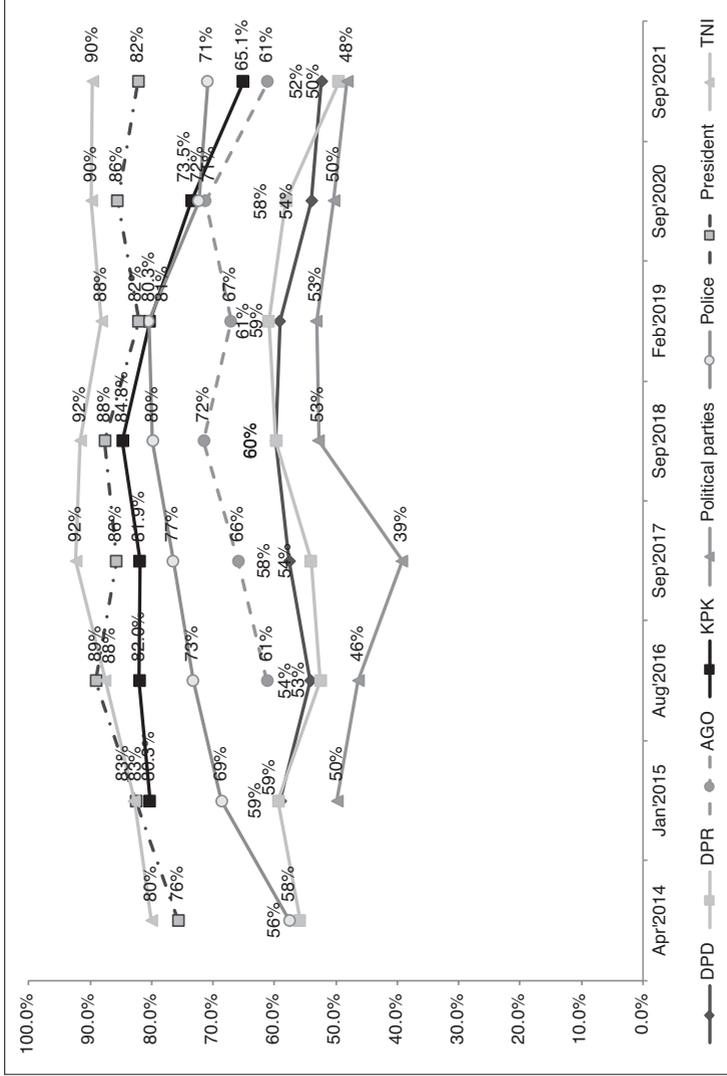
## **MEASURES OF FACTORS AFFECTING PUBLIC TRUST IN THE MILITARY**

This section introduces independent variables to explain why some individuals are more likely than others to have confidence in the army. As indicated earlier, I examine two dependent variables: (1) public trust in the military; (2) confidence in the army to act in the best interests of the public. The central independent variables are informed by the five contextual factors presented earlier.

The first dimensional factor I want to determine is the prestige of the military. I asked respondents to indicate their level of support or agreement in response to the following three statements:

1. TNI is conceived from the “womb” of the people so it is impossible for TNI to hurt the people's feelings.
2. I'm proud if the men and women of the Republic of Indonesia are willing to serve in the army.
3. Military is the noblest profession because they dare to make the ultimate sacrifice of body and soul for the nation and motherland.

**Figure 3: Trend Data of Trust in Political Institutions, 2014–21 (%)**



The last two questions are adapted from Burda (1999) and Hodný (1998). Each respondent was asked to answer each question by using a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree). The “don’t know” or “no response” answers are not included in the analysis. The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the variables used to measure the index is 0.736, meaning that the variables exhibit a high degree of internal consistency, and this suggests that the items in the test are highly correlated. The average score based on a scale from 1 to 5 is 3.784, which means that the army enjoys high prestige in Indonesian society.

The second is threat perceptions. I asked respondents to indicate their level of support or agreement in response to the following four statements:

1. The Chinese government’s claim to the Natuna waters is a serious threat to Indonesia’s sovereignty.
2. Indonesia must not ignore threats from neighbouring countries (such as Malaysia, Australia, etc.); besides we have already had a confrontation with Malaysia in the past.
3. The threat of the rise of the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) is real because they have rebelled against the state several times.
4. There is foreign intervention and interference in separatist movements occurring in Papua or Maluku.

Similarly, support for each item is measured with a simple 5-point scale. This index presents high levels of internal consistency, with Cronbach alpha coefficients of 0.822 suggesting that the items that make up the perceived threat index are highly correlated. The average score is 3.720, suggesting that Indonesian voters typically perceive high levels of threats to Indonesia.

As for the perceived weak civilian leaders’ index, I asked respondents to indicate their level of support or agreement in response to the following four statements which I derived from Mietzner (2011) and Croissant and Kuehn (2009):

1. There are many civilian politicians who put their own or group’s interests before their country’s national interests.

2. Civilian officials at the central and regional levels who don't have military background are generally unable to deal with the nation's serious problems.
3. Unlike those officials who have served in the military, most civilian leaders are less disciplined.
4. Firm or strong leadership is rarely found in leaders or officials who come from a civilian background or have not served in the military.

Each respondent was asked to show his/her agreement on each item by using a five-point scale.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the relatively larger support for statements on military prestige and perceived threats, support for statements on perceived weak civilian politicians, although still substantial, was slightly lower, with an average score of 3.375.

Regarding the dimension of the allegation of human rights violations committed by the military, I asked respondents whether they agree that the issue of human rights violations involving the TNI was oftentimes fabricated by foreign elements to discredit the Indonesian army. The stronger the level of agreement with the statement displayed by respondents, the more likely the respondent believes the allegation of human rights violations to be a foreign fabricated issue meant to discredit the military. The mean score is 3.311, which means that on a scale of 1 to 5, the proportion who agree with the statement is slightly more than those who disagree.

The final dimension index is military professionalism; this is measured by agreement with the following item statements:

1. Since the reformation era, the TNI has consistently been a professional army and has a neutral attitude and keeps a distance from daily politics.
2. The TNI is bound to be under the power of the President who is elected by the people and the TNI is always subject to the chain of command under him.

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<sup>4</sup> The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the variables used to measure this index is 0.827.

3. In normal or non-war situations or when there are no major riots that the police cannot handle, the army may not be directly involved in any security or order enforcement in society.
4. Since the abolishment of ABRI's (Indonesian army's former acronym) dual function, the TNI has effectively ended their active roles inside the government and consequently has had its political influence diminished.

As with previous index measurements, each respondent was asked to give his/her response agreement on a 5-point scale.<sup>5</sup> The average score regarding the frequency of support for military professionalism is 3.510, meaning most agree with the four military professionalism items above. However, based on the average means of the five indices above, the highest average score on a scale of 1 to 5 is the prestige and threat indices, 3.784 and 3.720 respectively. In other words, the highest level of public support among the five indices tested is registered for the items that make up the prestige and threat index.

## **THE DETERMINANTS OF PUBLIC TRUST IN THE TNI**

Table 1 shows the regression results with respect to public trust in the TNI. In the bivariate analysis, four factors are significantly correlated with trust in the TNI, namely prestige,<sup>6</sup> perceived threat, military professionalism, and human rights abuse allegations. In the bivariate analysis, the only thing that was not significantly related was the perception that civilian politicians are weak.

Multivariate analysis confirmed that the threat perception variable was not spurious. It remains significant when controlled with all control variables included in the model. In fact, the significance increased

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<sup>5</sup> The Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the variables used to measure this index is 0.761.

<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, when analysed using multivariate analysis, the prestige variable loses its significance.

**Table 1: Linear Regression Analysis of Determinants of Public Trust in the TNI / Military and Confidence in the TNI to Act in the Best Interest of the Public**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Trust in the TNI</i>		<i>Confidence in the TNI</i>	
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>
Constant	2.4972*** (0.143)	2.5253*** (0.239)	2.6766*** (0.145)	3.1867*** (0.242)
Prestige of military service	0.097*** (0.029)	0.0226 (0.037)	0.0714** (0.03)	0.0849** (0.038)
Threat perceptions	0.064** (0.029)	0.0991*** (0.035)	0.0134 (0.029)	0.0081 (0.036)
Allegation of human right abuses	-0.1058*** (0.025)	-0.1207*** (0.032)	-0.1195*** (0.025)	-0.178*** (0.032)
Military professionalism	0.0646 (0.034)	0.0941** (0.041)	0.1083*** (0.034)	0.0913** (0.042)
Weak civilian politicians	0.0382 (0.029)	0.076** (0.034)	0.0226 (0.03)	0.0095 (0.035)
<i>Demographics</i>				
Male		-0.0059 (0.047)		0.0354 (0.047)
Islam		-0.1681** (0.069)		-0.1527** (0.07)
Javanese		0.0679 (0.052)		-0.0327 (0.053)
Rural		-0.0104 (0.049)		0.0329 (0.05)
Income		-0.0052 (0.008)		-0.0082 (0.008)
<i>Political Partisanship</i>				
Jokowi voters		0.1108** (0.05)		-0.1061** (0.05)
<i>Socialization</i>				
Education		-0.0067 (0.011)		-0.0026 (0.011)
Mainstream media		0.0268 (0.033)		-0.0314 (0.033)
Social media usage		0.0014 (0.056)		0.1547*** (0.057)
<i>Democratic Support</i>				
Democratic preference		-0.0257 (0.051)		-0.0204 (0.052)
Democratic satisfaction		0.0163 (0.035)		0.0239 (0.036)
<i>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.055	0.084	0.049	0.081
<i>n</i>	660	466	657	466

Notes: \*\*Significant, p-value <5 per cent; \*\*\*Significant, p-value <1 per cent; B Coefficient (Std. Error).

from 95 per cent to 99 per cent. This means that the greater the public perceived threat, the greater the trust level registered for TNI. This finding confirms previous research showing that the greater the perceived threats, the greater the public's confidence in the institutions responsible for national defence. What is interesting is the variable of alleged human rights violations and foreign intervention. This variable stands out as a strong predictor of trust in the army. Apart from remaining significant at 99 per cent when controlled with all variables in the model, the substantive effect of alleged human rights violations was the largest compared to other factors. However, the variable presents a negative coefficient. This means that the more a respondent concurs with the statement that allegations of human rights violations by the TNI are often concocted by foreign elements to discredit the TNI, the less trust they have in the military, and vice versa. In other words, people who professed high trust towards the military tend to hold the view that human rights violations involving TNI personnel should be a cause for the military authorities to be more introspective instead of diverting the issue as foreign interference.

What I found to be compelling in Table 1 is the variable regarding the perception of weak civilian politicians. Although the bivariate analysis was not significant, when all variables are included, this variable turned out to be significant at the 95 per cent level. This means that trust in the military is also affected by the perception that civilian politicians are weak. Thus, the prevailing view among senior military officers that civilian leaders are weak, unpatriotic, corrupt and incompetent (Mietzner 2011) is also shared by the public. Furthermore, the multivariate analysis also confirmed military professionalism as a determinant of trust. The more a respondent professes agreement with the four statements that confirm the TNI's commitment to a professional military ethos above, the higher the tendency for him to trust the TNI.

Among the tested demographic variables, only the variable of religion is significant, but the direction of the coefficient is negative. This means that Muslims tend to display less trust in the TNI. Or conversely, non-Muslims tend to trust the military more. It could be that the religious minorities perceive the military as the bastion of pluralism and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, thus acting as the guarantor

of the security of minority groups. The finding that Muslims tend to have less trust in the TNI is interesting and requires further study.

The partisan factor is positively and significantly related to trust in the military. Jokowi voters trust the TNI more than Prabowo supporters at the time the survey was conducted in September 2021. This is interesting since Prabowo has a military background and credentials. The last few incidents involved the mass supporters of Rizieq Shihab—who in fact were Prabowo voters in 2019—and the TNI could explain this phenomenon. Among them, General Dudung Abdurachman (the current Army Chief of Staff, KASAD) while serving as commander of the army in the capital DKI Jakarta removed Shihab's billboard in November 2020. He also threatened to decimate the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) before the government finally disbanded the right-wing Islamic organization at the end of 2020 (Tim Detikcom 2021). Surprisingly, trust in the military in Indonesia is also found to be unrelated to a preference for, or satisfaction with, democracy. This finding contradicts those of previous works in which support for democracy is often positively correlated with trust in the military, such as in Brazil but negatively associated with confidence in the military, like in Chile (Solar 2020).

Table 1 also displays the second dependent variable regression analysis, namely the belief that the military acts in the best interests of the public. In general, the results are not different from the determinants of public trust in the military. The variable of alleged human rights violations remains significant in explaining public confidence in the TNI. Similar to public trust as its dependent variable, the direction is also negative. This means that the more they show disagreement with the statement that human rights violations involving the TNI are concocted by foreign elements, the more confidence they have in the military, and vice versa.

As expected, military professionalism is a significant predictor of public confidence that the TNI has represented the interests of the public at large. The prestige of military service remains significant in explaining public confidence even after controlling for other variables. Meanwhile, perceptions of threats do not seem to correlate with public confidence in whether the TNI is acting in the best interests of the people or not. In contrast to trust in the military, public confidence in whether or not the TNI best represents the aspirations of the citizens is not determined by

the size of the threat. Likewise, the perception of weak politicians does not at all explain the public's confidence in the TNI.

As with the determinant of public trust in the TNI, demographic variables in general have a small correlation to the public's confidence that the TNI represents the people's aspirations. However, the religious factor remains significant: non-Muslims tend to express confidence in the TNI, and Muslims less so. The partisan factor is again significant, but this time the direction is reversed compared to trust in the TNI. Prabowo voters tend to show more confidence that the TNI will represent the interests of the people, compared to Jokowi voters. In other words, the variable of trust and confidence in the TNI are diametrically perceived by the two antagonistic bases of supporters of presidential candidates in 2019. For Jokowi voters, confidence in the TNI as an institution does not automatically make the military able to represent fully the interests of the people. Among the socialization factors, only the use of social media positively and significantly explains the confidence in the TNI. The substantive effect of this variable is so large that it can be concluded that the more often the public accesses social media compared to mainstream media, the more confidence they have in the TNI.

## **WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIGH LEVELS OF TRUST IN THE TNI FOR DEMOCRACY?**

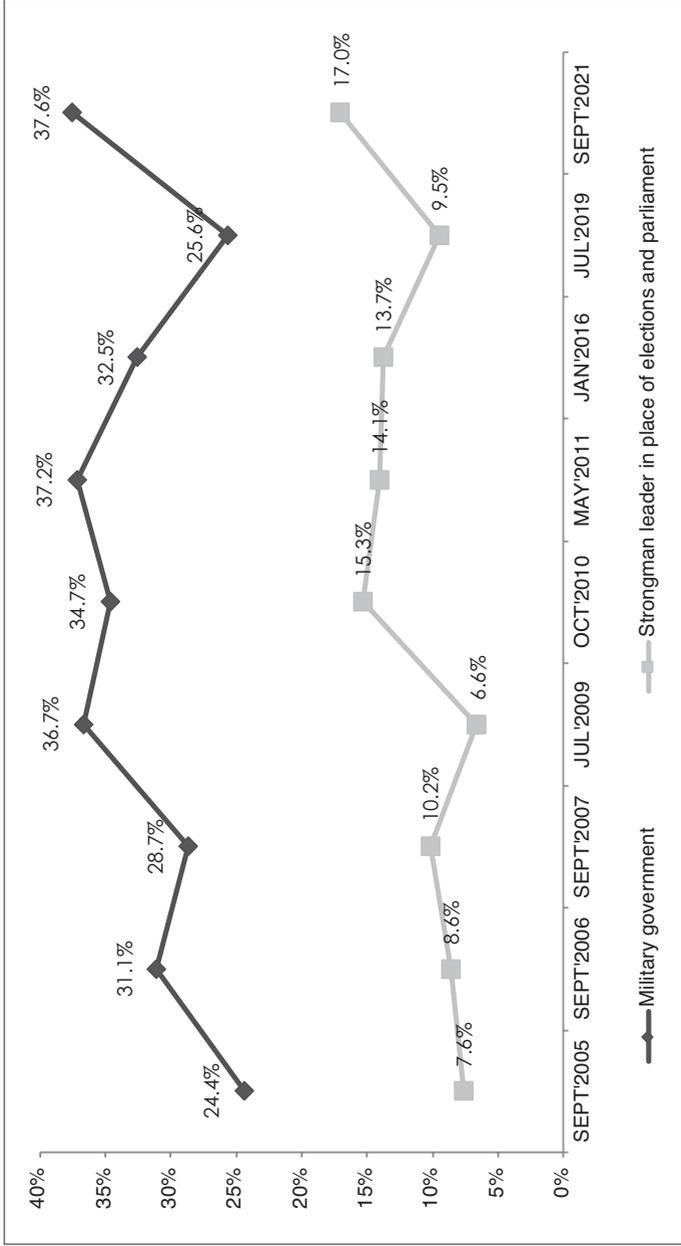
The high level of trust and confidence in the TNI raises serious questions about its impact on democracy in Indonesia. Although nominal public support for democracy is still ostensibly high, a deeper look at several academic studies reveals that the wider public in general does not subscribe to democratic norms and values (Aspinall et al. 2020; Fossati, Muhtadi, and Warburton 2021). Furthermore, we should be concerned that the high level of public trust in the TNI will give further political leverage to the military amidst the democratic backsliding reflected in the declining democracy index in Indonesia over the past decade. Note that despite more than two decades of reform, civilian supremacy over the military is not stable enough in Indonesia to become a foregone conclusion (Mietzner 2011).

At the same time, President Jokowi is also generally perceived as lacking ideological commitment to democracy (Muhtadi 2015). Due to his civilian background, Jokowi is very pragmatic in buttressing and gaining support from the military by doling out more public positions to the military. Moreover, heavy criticism levelled against Jokowi for doling out strategic positions to the Indonesian police has forced him to make compensation for the military as well. It is during Jokowi's terms in office, which is supposed to embody civilian authority over the military as opposed to the era of his predecessor Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who has a military background, that the TNI has been gaining ground in civil-military relations (Sambhi 2021). This troubling trend above is marked by the public display of former top military figures occupying key government positions, increasing dependence on the army's territorial system, the deep involvement of the TNI outside its traditional role in defence issues as well as upcoming political arrangement for the appointment of active soldiers as temporary regional heads filling in the leadership vacuum in hundreds of regions before the next 2024 local elections. Moreover, during the pandemic, the role of the TNI has been very central, both in enforcing health protocols and carrying out vaccinations.

In addition to determining the level of public trust in the TNI, my survey also included two indicators used by the Asian Barometer to measure support for authoritarianism. First, when I asked for the level of approval on the statement that "active soldiers should lead our government", 37 per cent of respondents would strongly agree/quite agree, 42.3 per cent strongly disagree/disagree, and 20 per cent did not answer. Second, I asked for the level of support for the statement that "we should abolish the DPR and the general election, and leave it to a strongman leader to make the decision". Although most of the respondents, 63.5 per cent, would strongly disagree/disagree, 17.1 per cent of respondents expressed support for authoritarian leaders. The rest did not give out any response. Figure 4 clearly shows that mass sentiment towards the form of government led by active military figures and strongman leaders increased sharply in 2021, especially compared to the 2019 survey.

To further examine whether these two indicators are related to the five factors that are the primary interest of this study, Table 2 displays

**Figure 4: Trend on Support for the Military Government and Strongman Leader, 2005–21 (%)**



Source: LSI and the Asian Barometer, except data for September 2021.

**Table 2: Determinants of Support for Military Government and Strongman Leaders**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Military Government</i>		<i>Strongman Leader</i>
	<i>Model 1</i>	<i>Model 2</i>	
Constant	2.1097*** (0.207)	1.9803*** (0.342)	1.0344*** (0.338)
Prestige of military service	0.1374*** (0.042)	0.1961*** (0.052)	0.1069** (0.052)
Threat perceptions	-0.1246*** (0.042)	-0.1028** (0.051)	-0.0289 (0.051)
Allegation of human right abuses	-0.0408 (0.036)	0.0101 (0.046)	0.0952** (0.045)
Military professionalism	-0.0047 (0.049)	-0.0122 (0.059)	0.1706*** (0.058)
Weak civilian politicians	0.105** (0.042)	0.0849 (0.05)	0.0075 (0.049)
<i>Demographics</i>			
Male		-0.0686 (0.067)	-0.0404 (0.067)
Islam		-0.005 (0.098)	-0.0497 (0.096)
Javanese		0.0263 (0.075)	-0.1143 (0.075)
Rural		-0.0547 (0.07)	-0.045 (0.07)
Income		-0.0088 (0.011)	-0.021 (0.011)
<i>Political Partisanship</i>			
Jokowi voters		-0.1261 (0.071)	0.1214 (0.07)
<i>Socialization</i>			
Education		-0.0454*** (0.016)	0.0049 (0.016)
Mainstream media		0.1606*** (0.046)	0.1508*** (0.046)
Social media usage		-0.1504** (0.083)	-0.1187 (0.081)
<i>Democratic Support</i>			
Democratic preference		-0.1059 (0.076)	-0.3145*** (0.073)
Democratic satisfaction		-0.0149 (0.05)	-0.0499 (0.05)
<i>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup></i>	0.031	0.085	0.109
<i>n</i>	609	437	448

Notes: \*\*Significant, p-value <5 per cent; \*\*\*Significant, p-value <1 per cent; B Coefficient (Std. Error).

the results of linear regression, with two dependent variables at the same time. Although the prestige variable is not related to trust in the TNI, as previously explained, this factor turned out to be one of the main determinants for the support of the military government and strongman leaders. The substantive effect of prestige is so great that it can be concluded that those who support active military roles in government administration and strongman leaders being allowed to dissolve parliament and cancel elections are voters who glorify the TNI's past and have great pride in the TNI. Military professionalism also significantly explains the wish for strong leaders but does not correlate with support for the military government.

As for the threat factor, it is negatively correlated to support for military government. In other words, the higher the threat perception, the less support is displayed for the involvement of active military figures in government administration. This can be interpreted that if the public highly perceives a threat, the army is expected to focus on the defence of the country and not on getting involved in politics. This threat variable is still negatively associated with support for strongman leaders, at least in bivariate analysis. Meanwhile, the direction of the coefficient of alleged human rights violations is positive; This means that the more a respondent agrees that human rights abuse allegations are concocted by foreign forces, the more they tend to display positive sentiments towards a military government or a strong leader. The relationship between the two has a statistically significant impact, at the 95 per cent level. This shows supporters of strongman leaders do not believe that the military commits human rights violations and believe the issue is a bogus issue concocted by foreign forces. The perception of weak politicians is not statistically significant, in the strictest sense (95 per cent).

Moreover, demographic factors and political participation are not significantly related to support for military government and strongman leaders. But the level of education significantly explains the support of the military government. The variable of education presents a negative coefficient and is in the expected direction, implying that the higher the level of education the more they expressed resistance to the involvement of active military officers in the government. Mainstream media (TV, newspapers and radio) consumption also positively correlates with

support for the two indicators of authoritarianism. On the other hand, the more often they access social media, the less they support a military government. This indicates that those who subscribe to mainstream media tend to be less critical, while those tuning in to social media tend to support a more democratic discourse. As expected, support for the democracy variable is negatively correlated with support for a military government and strongman leaders.

## CONCLUSION

At this point, we can conclude that the TNI continues to be the state institution most trusted by the public compared to other political and social institutions. Among the five factors that were analysed as potential determinants based on past and recent academic literature, two of them consistently and significantly explain the level of public trust in the TNI and public confidence that the TNI acts in the best interests of the people. First, the more respondents disagree with the statements of alleged human rights violations as foreign interference or foreign concoction, the more they trust the TNI, and vice versa. This finding should provide an impetus for the Indonesian military to re-examine its alleged past human rights abuse records. The public views human rights violations by the military as still an unfinished internal reform task for the TNI, and therefore they expect the military not to shift the blame to external parties. Moreover, as part of its commitment to undertake further internal reform, the TNI is determined to avoid human rights violations in carrying out its duties. In a pocketbook entitled *Guidelines for Indonesian Army Soldiers in the Application of Human Rights* published by the TNI (Widhana 2017), it is stated that the duty of the military should not be justification for carrying out torture. Although human rights violations have decreased considerably compared to the Suharto era, cases of violence involving the military are still rampant.<sup>7</sup> As these cases were obscured from public

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<sup>7</sup> According to a respected NGO Kontras, from October 2019 to September 2020, violence and human rights violations committed or involving members of the TNI reached seventy-six cases, the majority in the form of torture, shootings and intimidation (Widhana 2017).

knowledge, they had not made a significant dent in public confidence in the TNI. Recent controversial human rights violations commonly exposed by activists and foreign media usually concern Papua, and such information is usually based on biased reports from local media that filter the human rights abuse stories through a nationalistic prism, implying that the serious allegations actually emanate from sinister foreign sources or scenarios.

Second, a professional military is also found to be a significant predictor of public trust and confidence. The most obvious indicator of the professionalism of the military is their strict discipline in resisting being embroiled in domestic politics. While military professionalism in established democracies may be a tradition, many new democracies such as Indonesia have not yet fully accomplished their democratic mission to disentangle the military from politics. The civilian authorities are oftentimes haphazardly inconsistent in designating the military's role within a democratic structure or system. Recently, there have been strong indications of an increase in the role of the military outside of its traditional role in defence issues, such as the rice field development programme, the dismantling of Rizieq Shihab's billboards, and plans to appoint active military officers as interim regional heads. The more involved the military is in civilian affairs, the greater the potential for a decline in public confidence in the institution.

The high and tenable level of public trust and confidence in the TNI raises concerns about growing political leverage for the military at a time when Indonesia is experiencing a democratic setback. This concern is reasonable; my survey in September 2021 also found an increasing trend of support for active military involvement in government and for strongman leaders, two indicators that are closely related to the image of the military. The determinant factors that consistently explain these two indicators of authoritarianism are the prestige and romanticization of the past and the decrease in threat perception. The TNI being the "people's army" is due to it being seen to have been conceived by the Indonesian people during the revolution, instead of being formed by civilian political leaders (Jenkins 1983), which is an idea that is still very much alive in the public imagination. Those who ascribe high prestige to the military are more likely to support a military government or strongman leaders.

In addition, with regard to the threat perception factor, I found that the lower the perception of internal or external threats to Indonesia, the higher the support for both authoritarian indicators. Conversely, the higher the threat level perceived by the public, the lower the support for a military government or strongman leader. Put simply, the greater the perception of the threat, the greater the public's preference for the TNI to detach itself from political affairs in order to focus on the country's defence and security. In conclusion, if the TNI wants to maintain its place as the most trusted institution by the public, it is essential for it to keep its distance from politics and to stay true to its reform commitments.

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