

Wednesday, August 26, 1998

Wither the general's star

ANDREAS HARSONO
The Nation

The sacking of Prabowo Subianto, former president Suharto's son-in- law, marks the end of his dramatic climb in the Indonesian military, reports Andreas Harsono.

ON May 21, several hours after Indonesian strongman Suharto announced in a nationally-broadcast speech that he was to step down from his 33-year authoritarian rule, Lt Gen Prabowo Subianto, was relieved of his command of the strategic forces in Jakarta.

Prabowo, who is also Suharto's son-in-law, was immediately dispatched to head a military college in Bandung, a hill town about a three-hour drive from Jakarta.

Rumours in Jakarta were rife that Prabowo was furious over the demotion and insisted on meeting the newly-installed President B J Habibie and military commander General Wiranto. But, despite bringing his troops, he was unable to enter the Presidential Palace to meet Habibie.

His removal had indeed shocked the whole establishment here. According to the military spokesmen, it was a "regular tour of duty". Indeed nobody believed it.

It is widely known here that Prabowo and Wiranto are old rivals. Four-star Wiranto represented a faction that wanted to see a cleaner, more professional military, while three-star Prabowo is a "traditional" Indonesian officer who never hides his fondness for politics.

Prabowo is closely associated with a collection of Islamic organisations dedicated to a Muslim-first ideology. He helped to create a think-tank for young Islamic activists and he has given support to groups whose rhetoric revolves around an aggrieved sense of Muslim chauvinism and a deep racial hatred of Chinese-Indonesians.

Several days after the dismissal, Jakarta was still buzzing with rumours that Prabowo, who used to head the Kopassus elite command, was involved in provoking massive riots in mid-May that killed more than 1,000 people.

Prabowo was also alleged to be involved in the burning of many Chinese-owned buildings and the gang rapes of Chinese-Indonesian women.

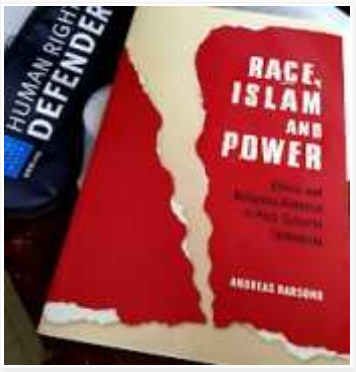
A number of journalists who have interviewed Prabowo were stunned by his anti-Chinese remarks. A British journalist once had a three-hour interview with Prabowo during which the general talked about an "overseas Chinese conspiracy" which aimed to bring down Indonesia's economy.

Andreas Harsono

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Prabowo said he would like "to evict the un-nationalistic Chinese" from Indonesia.

"I believe in genetics. Intelligence depends on race," Prabowo once said.

Which race would Prabowo put on top?

"Yellow people," he answered. "They're just like Jews in Europe or the Parsis in India. We hate the Chinese because we know they outperform us," the general said.

"The Muslims have an inferiority complex and feel like they don't even own their own country. The fact that three per cent of the population owns 70 per cent of the economy is the main problem of Indonesia," he said in a clear reference to the Chinese minority who control most retail business in the country.

Others charged that Prabowo had allegedly instructed his Kopassus soldiers to kidnap human rights workers and activists in an apparent bid to weaken the opposition and shored up the ailing Suharto dictatorship.

Human rights groups have documented 23 cases of activists kidnapped this year, nine of whom have returned with gruesome accounts of being tortured for weeks. Fourteen others are still missing.

Indeed, many Indonesians wondered: how could a well-trained officer like Prabowo commit such crimes?

"It really hurts me to know that the Kopassus had been used to kidnap and torture our own people," said Lt Gen Agum Gumelar, a Wiranto colleague who was the former head of the elite command.

Prabowo is the scion of a blue-blood family. The Hong Kong-based *Far Eastern Economic Review* once called the family the "Kennedys of Indonesia".

His father is Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, the godfather of Indonesia's technocrats, and the only person to be minister under both Sukarno and Suharto. Prabowo's brother is tycoon Hashim Djojohadikusumo who heads the widely-diversified Tirtamas group.

Prabowo's brother-in-law is Sudradjat Djiwandono, the former central bank governor. Prabowo himself is married to Suharto's middle daughter Siti Hediati.

Even his relatives were surprised by the charges of wrongdoing against him. His parents were reportedly "shocked" when told that Prabowo was directly involved in the kidnapping of activists who were electrocuted, beaten and held in underground cells.

Prabowo, however, remained calm amid the charges and even gave a five-hour interview to American journalist Margaret Scott before he was questioned by a military council in early August.

"They put me down in the gutter," Prabowo reportedly said.

The public pressure and the downfall of Suharto have prompted the military to set up a military council to question Prabowo and two other Kopassus officers.

On Monday, Prabowo was fired from all posts in the military while his two sidekicks were stripped of their authority but allowed to remain in the army.

"They must be held responsible for their attitude and action which obviously violated the officer's code of honour and damaged the image of the armed forces," Wiranto said.

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Western military sources said Wiranto dragged Prabowo before the council to boost the military's credibility, preserve his own position and solidify his support.

"It is not clear whether Prabowo is the anti-Christ who orchestrated everything. There may be a tendency to use the council by senior figures to offload their own sins on him," a foreign military attache said.

Now that the three-star general's career is coming to an end, a former colleague said Prabowo was not really prepared to have such a burdensome responsibility. Prabowo rose fast through the ranks when Suharto was in power. He was the first among his classmates to reach such high positions, no doubt with help from his father-in-law.

Among the army elite circle, Prabowo is considered as a "sick person". Often brash, he was said to have a "split personality". But what he wanted, he always got, most probably assisted by Suharto.

Ironically, with Suharto gone, Prabowo had a real opportunity to show who he really was. But it was too late.

Posted by andreasharsono at 5:25 PM

Labels: English, News Story

1 comment:

Anonymous said...

But Prabowo is now a presidential candidate! He rises much higher than his initial dream in 1998. You are wrong to say that his career is finished. Got to learn about how his father, Sumitro Djojohadikusumo, rose from being on the wanted list of the Sukarno era, to being the "begawan ekonomi" of the New Order. Sumitro died in peace!

February 21, 2005

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