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Civilian Militarism: Authority and Democratic Governance in Post-Reform Indonesia

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examines why civilian actors may reject formal military dominance while simultaneously adopting military-derived values, symbols, and leadership styles. Rather than assuming a causal effect on democratic quality, it explores how this paradox is interpreted in relation to civilian authority and democratic governance in post-Reform Indonesia.

Design/methodology/approach: An interpretive qualitative case study was conducted in North Maluku Province. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with government officials, traditional political elites, and media leaders were carried out between September and October 2025. Participants were selected purposively until recurring themes reached theoretical saturation. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis combined with elements of critical discourse analysis, focusing on recurring meanings attached to military involvement and military-derived authority.

Findings: Respondents rejected active-duty military control of civilian institutions but regarded retired officers and military participation in disaster response as acceptable under specific conditions. Military symbols, discipline, hierarchy, and decisiveness were also adopted by civilian actors as sources of legitimacy and social order. These practices were reinforced by post-conflict memory, security narratives, and local historical traditions. Within the North Maluku case, these patterns are interpreted as civilian militarism: the cultural reproduction of military-derived authority without direct institutional domination.

Practical implications: Strengthening civilian institutional capacity, transparent oversight, and participatory leadership may help prevent military-style efficiency from substituting for democratic accountability and deliberation.

Originality/value: The study shifts attention from military intervention to civilian agency in reproducing militaristic authority.

Keywords: civilian authority; civilian militarism; civil-military relations; democratic governance; Indonesia

Paper type: Research Paper (Qualitative Case Study)

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Militerisme Sipil: Otoritas dan Tata Kelola Demokrasi di Indonesia Pasca-Reformasi

Abstrak

Tujuan: Penelitian ini mengkaji mengapa aktor sipil dapat menolak dominasi formal militer tetapi pada saat yang sama mengadopsi nilai, simbol, dan gaya kepemimpinan yang berasal dari tradisi militer. Alih-alih mengasumsikan adanya pengaruh kausal terhadap kualitas demokrasi, penelitian ini menelaah bagaimana paradoks tersebut dimaknai dalam kaitannya dengan otoritas sipil dan tata kelola demokratis di Indonesia pascareformasi.

Desain/metodologi/pendekatan: Penelitian menggunakan studi kasus kualitatif interpretif di Provinsi Maluku Utara. Wawancara mendalam semi-terstruktur dilakukan terhadap pejabat pemerintah, elite politik tradisional, dan pemimpin media pada September–Oktober 2025. Informan dipilih secara purposif hingga tema-tema berulang mencapai kejenuhan teoretis. Data dianalisis melalui analisis tematik yang dipadukan dengan unsur analisis wacana kritis, dengan fokus pada makna yang berulang terkait keterlibatan militer dan otoritas yang berakar pada nilai-nilai militer.

Temuan: Responden menolak penguasaan institusi sipil oleh prajurit aktif, tetapi menerima purnawirawan dan keterlibatan militer dalam penanggulangan bencana pada kondisi tertentu. Simbol, disiplin, hierarki, dan ketegasan militer juga digunakan sebagai sumber legitimasi dan ketertiban sosial. Pola ini diperkuat oleh ingatan pascakonflik, narasi keamanan, dan tradisi sejarah lokal. Dalam konteks Maluku Utara, pola tersebut dipahami sebagai militarisme sipil.

Implikasi praktis: Penguatan kapasitas institusi sipil, pengawasan transparan, dan kepemimpinan partisipatif diperlukan agar efisiensi bergaya militer tidak menggantikan akuntabilitas dan deliberasi demokratis.

Originalitas/nilai: Penelitian menekankan peran aktor sipil dalam mereproduksi otoritas militeristik.

Kata Kunci: hubungan sipil-militer; Indonesia; militarisme sipil; otoritas sipil; tata kelola demokratis

Jenis Penelitian: Artikel Penelitian (Studi Kasus Kualitatif)

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's post-1998 Reformasi substantially reduced the formal political role of the armed forces, yet the boundary between civilian and military authority remains a continuing issue in democratic governance. Recent studies show that civil-military relations are no longer defined only by direct military intervention in politics. They are also shaped by parliamentary oversight, legal arrangements, the appointment of retired officers, non-defence missions, and the ability of civilian institutions to regulate military influence (Ng & Kurniawan, 2024; Nalle, 2026; Haripin et al., 2023). Indonesian scholarship similarly shows that military reform has produced meaningful civilian control while leaving important institutional and political tensions unresolved (Djuyandi et al., 2025a, 2025b; Sambhi, 2023; Laksmana, 2021). These tensions make civil-military relations a governance issue as much as a defence issue because they concern who exercises authority, how legitimacy is constructed, and how democratic institutions define acceptable forms of power.

A central difficulty is that institutional civilian supremacy does not automatically remove the social prestige of military values. The Indonesian military continues to enjoy considerable public trust, while military organization is often associated with discipline, decisiveness, coordination, and the ability to act during emergencies (Muhtadi, 2022). In Southeast Asian disaster governance, militaries possess logistical and organizational capacities that make them prominent actors in humanitarian response networks (Trias & Cook, 2023). Indonesian studies of civil-military cooperation likewise show that disaster response and other non-war missions can make military involvement visible to citizens as public service rather than political intervention (Stephanus, 2023; Sjamsoeddin et al., 2023). Such functional legitimacy can coexist with formal support for civilian supremacy.

This coexistence points to a distinction between control of the military and control of militarisation. Civilian control generally asks whether elected institutions can direct, regulate, and oversee the armed forces. Militarisation, however, can also occur through the diffusion and normalization of military logics in civilian life. Contemporary work on Indonesia has begun to capture this wider process. Gunawan (2024), for example, examines civilian control of militarisation through public discourse surrounding military-law reform, while Kuehn and Levy (2021) distinguish militarisation from the narrower question of direct military control. Levy (2021) similarly emphasizes that legitimacy around the use of military power depends on broader social and political processes. Earlier governance-oriented work in JPP also underlines the democratic importance of maintaining workable civilian-military boundaries, as illustrated by Rugian et al. (2022) in their comparative discussion of military power and democratic breakdown in Myanmar. Although the

national contexts differ, the broader lesson is that democratic institutions depend on both formal control and the social legitimacy of civilian authority.

In this article, civilian militarism is defined as the civilian-led reproduction and legitimation of military-derived values, symbols, organizational styles, and security logics within formally civilian settings. The term draws on Rodriguez's (2018) analysis of civilian elites adopting militaristic approaches under prolonged insecurity and on later work that locates civilian militarism in the integration of military or militaristic practices into domestic governance by civilian authorities (Rodriguez, 2026). It is distinct from direct military intervention, which centers on military institutional agency, and narrower than militarisation, which refers more broadly to the expansion or normalization of military logics and roles. For this study, the concept is operationalized through three observable dimensions in the interview material: (1) civilian-defined acceptance or rejection of military roles and expertise; (2) civilian appropriation of military symbols, discipline, hierarchy, and command-oriented leadership; and (3) legitimation of these practices through narratives of security, emergency effectiveness, order, or historical authority. This operational definition allows the study to analyze civilian agency without presuming direct military domination or a measured decline in democratic quality.

The state of the art can be read across three connected strands. First, post-Reform Indonesia research emphasizes institutional civilian control, parliamentary oversight, legal reform, and the contested expansion of military roles (Ng & Kurniawan, 2024; Gunawan, 2024; Nalle, 2026). Second, studies of non-defence missions show how disaster response and other public-service functions can generate functional legitimacy for military organizations without amounting to direct political rule (Trias & Cook, 2023; Stephanus, 2023; Sjamsoeddin et al., 2023). Third, the wider militarism literature shifts attention from formal military intervention to the civilian production and normalization of militaristic values and practices. Rodriguez (2018) uses civilian militarism to examine militaristic approaches adopted by civilian elites under prolonged insecurity, while Rodriguez (2026) develops the concept for civilian-led integration of military and militaristic practices into domestic governance. Together, these strands show that institutional control and cultural militarisation are analytically distinct but potentially overlapping processes.

The problem becomes more complex when militaristic practices are reproduced by civilians themselves. Military-style uniforms, hierarchical organizational forms, command language, and ideals of discipline can be adopted by civilian organizations without any formal transfer of military power. Such practices are often valued because they communicate seriousness, solidarity, masculinity, order, and organizational cohesion (Aktaş et al., 2023). Militaristic organizational

cultures can also survive and change through symbolic routines and professional narratives rather than institutional coercion alone (Lonergan & Snyder, 2025). At the broader political level, research suggests that militarisation and democratic governance may coexist in uneasy ways, particularly where security concerns and demands for order increase the appeal of hierarchical authority (Banerjee & Webeck, 2024; Kollias & Tzeremes, 2024; Jenne & Martínez, 2022).

For government and politics, the key issue is therefore not simply whether soldiers enter civilian offices. It is also whether civilian actors define effective government through military-derived ideas of leadership and discipline. This is important because democratic governance depends on accountability, public participation, negotiation, and institutional capacity, whereas command-oriented authority tends to privilege hierarchy and compliance. Public governance research stresses that legitimacy and effectiveness are strengthened when state institutions can coordinate with society rather than rely solely on centralized command (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). Leadership research likewise treats authority as an institutional mechanism that shapes governance direction and organizational behavior (Muallidin, 2026). The contrast does not mean that discipline or decisiveness are inherently undemocratic; rather, the democratic consequence depends on how such qualities are embedded in rules, accountability, and participation.

Existing Indonesian studies have primarily examined legal reform, military professionalism, parliamentary oversight, defence policy, formal appointments, and the political position of the TNI (Fathullah et al., 2021; Gunawan, 2024; Haripin, 2020; Nalle, 2026; Purbasari et al., 2026). These studies are crucial, but they leave comparatively less attention to the everyday cultural reproduction of militaristic authority by civilian actors. This article addresses that gap through the concept of civilian militarism: the selective adoption by civilians of military-derived symbols, values, and modes of authority within non-military settings. Rather than treating civilian militarism as evidence of a return to formal military rule, the concept is used to investigate how civilians themselves participate in maintaining the cultural appeal of militaristic governance.

Against this literature, the novelty of the present study is not a claim that militarisation in Indonesia has been previously unexamined. Its contribution is narrower: it applies civilian militarism to the local-governance level to analyze how civilian actors themselves authorize, appropriate, and normalize military-derived forms of authority while continuing to endorse formal civilian supremacy. The North Maluku case brings together three mechanisms that are usually examined separately conditional acceptance of military expertise, functional legitimacy in disaster response, and the symbolic and historical reproduction of discipline and

command. This shifts the empirical focus from military institutional expansion alone to the civilian demand for and reproduction of militaristic legitimacy.

The study focuses on North Maluku, a province shaped by post-conflict memory, geographic fragmentation, recurring disaster risks, and the visible role of security institutions. It asks three questions: how do civilian actors define acceptable and unacceptable military involvement in civilian affairs; how are military-derived symbols and values used to construct civilian authority; and what are the implications for democratic governance? By answering these questions, the article contributes to the study of government and politics by showing that civilian supremacy is not only a constitutional or institutional arrangement. It is also a cultural achievement that depends on the capacity of civilian institutions to produce legitimacy, order, and effective governance through democratic means.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study used an interpretive qualitative case-study design to examine the meanings attached to civilian militarism in contemporary Indonesia. North Maluku Province was selected as an analytically strategic case because its post-conflict history, dispersed geography, exposure to disasters, and continuing security narratives provide a setting in which questions of authority and order are especially visible. Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted between September and October 2025. Participants were selected purposively from three groups with influence over local governance and public discourse: senior government officials, traditional political elites, and media leaders. Interviews continued until recurring themes concerning military involvement, authority, discipline, and leadership had stabilized, indicating theoretical saturation. The interview guide covered two core areas: perceptions of military involvement beyond defence functions and the civilian admiration, imitation, or internalization of military symbols and leadership practices. Interviews were conducted in a language comfortable for participants, audio-recorded with informed consent, and supported by field notes. The qualitative case-study approach follows the emphasis on contextual depth and analytical generalization described by Tisdell et al. (2025).

The analysis combined thematic analysis with elements of critical discourse analysis. Transcripts were read iteratively and coded around recurring concepts including discipline, hierarchy, command, legitimacy, security, order, civilian supremacy, and public service. Codes were then grouped into broader analytical themes and interpreted in relation to contemporary debates on civil-military relations, militarisation, government leadership, and democratic governance. Discursive attention was given to how respondents justified military-derived authority, distinguished active-duty personnel from retired officers, and framed military participation in disaster response. Reflexive memo-writing was used to

document interpretive decisions. Ethical safeguards included voluntary participation, informed consent, the right to withdraw, confidentiality, removal of personal identifiers where necessary, and secure handling of interview data. The study did not involve vulnerable populations, deception, or procedures posing physical or psychological risk.

The unit of analysis was the recurring meaning attached to military involvement and military-derived authority rather than the prevalence of an opinion in the wider population. Sampling sufficiency was therefore judged through thematic saturation, not statistical representativeness. To strengthen evidentiary traceability, each analytical theme is linked in the Results to the relevant interview account, participant role category where available, and field-note context, while reflexive memos document interpretive decisions. Interview evidence is presented at role level and through careful paraphrase; the Sultan of Ternate is identified where the public institutional role itself is analytically relevant to the historical discussion. The resulting claims are interpretive and case-bounded: the design does not estimate population attitudes or establish causal effects on democratic quality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Negotiating the Boundary of Civilian Authority

The interviews show that civilian attitudes toward military involvement are neither simply supportive nor simply oppositional. Respondents repeatedly drew a distinction between active-duty personnel and individuals with a military background who had formally retired. Active officers were generally considered inappropriate for routine civilian administrative positions because such appointments were understood to blur democratic boundaries and weaken the principle that civilian institutions should be governed by civilians. By contrast, retired officers were more readily accepted as legitimate civilian actors, especially when their appointment followed normal administrative or political procedures.

At the evidentiary level, the boundary theme rests on repeated interview distinctions between active-duty personnel and former officers who had formally retired. Participants treated active service as the relevant institutional threshold: military experience could be considered useful after retirement, but routine civilian office-holding by active-duty personnel was viewed as inconsistent with the expected civilian character of administration. This evidence supports an interpretation of how respondents understood civilian supremacy; it is not presented as a population estimate of public opinion.

This distinction reveals a status-based understanding of civilian supremacy. Respondents did not argue that military experience must disappear from civilian government. Instead, they emphasized formal reclassification and procedural

legitimacy. Military expertise was considered potentially useful once the individual had left active service. This finding is consistent with Haripin et al. (2023), who show that the presence of former military figures does not automatically produce the collapse of civilian supremacy because institutional arrangements still shape the extent of their authority. At the same time, recent legal and political debates demonstrate that the boundary remains contested when active-duty roles are expanded or institutional safeguards are weakened (Nalle, 2026; Purbasari et al., 2026). Parliamentary oversight also matters because civilian control depends on the capacity of elected institutions to monitor the defence sector rather than relying on military self-regulation (Ng & Kurniawan, 2024).

For governance, the important point is that civilian supremacy is interpreted through procedures as well as identities. Respondents were willing to borrow competence from military backgrounds, but they expected a formal transition into civilian status. This provides a practical compromise between democratic separation and administrative pragmatism. It also shows why debates that treat civilian and military spheres as completely isolated can miss the negotiated character of authority in post-Reform Indonesia.

Functional Legitimacy through Disaster Response and Public Service

A second theme concerns disaster response. Government officials and media participants frequently described the military as a reliable actor during floods, volcanic activity, and other emergencies. They emphasized rapid mobilization, logistics, clear command structures, and the ability to deploy personnel and equipment across difficult terrain. In these accounts, military involvement in disaster management was not interpreted as political interference. It was framed as public service that addressed gaps in civilian emergency capacity.

Government officials and media participants linked this conditional acceptance to concrete capabilities rapid mobilization, logistics, command coordination, and the ability to deploy personnel and equipment across difficult terrain. Their accounts therefore support a bounded interpretation: military involvement was evaluated positively when attached to emergency support, not as a general endorsement of military direction of civilian government.

The positive evaluation of military disaster roles helps explain why formal concerns about military involvement can coexist with strong public trust. Military legitimacy in this setting is produced through visible performance. Communities encounter soldiers through evacuation, logistics, security, and emergency assistance, and these experiences can become more politically meaningful than abstract debates about institutional boundaries. This finding corresponds with Muhtadi's (2022) observation that the Indonesian military enjoys high public trust, and with research showing that militaries are important nodes in humanitarian and disaster

governance networks across Southeast Asia (Trias & Cook, 2023). Studies of Indonesia's civil-military cooperation similarly identify non-war missions as an important arena in which military capability and civilian needs interact (Stephanus, 2023; Sjamsoeddin et al., 2023).

However, functional legitimacy creates a governance dilemma. When civilian institutions repeatedly depend on military capacity for non-defence tasks, the public may begin to associate effective government with military organization. The issue is not the emergency deployment itself, which may be legally and operationally necessary, but whether temporary functional advantages become a general model for civilian administration. Research on domestic military missions warns that expanded non-traditional roles can create democratic deficits if oversight and role boundaries are weak (Jenne & Martínez, 2022). The North Maluku findings therefore suggest that disaster governance should combine military support with sustained investment in civilian coordination, logistics, and local administrative capacity.

Table 1. Main Themes of Civilian Militarism and Their Governance Significance

Analytical theme	Empirical pattern	Governance significance
Civilian boundary	Active-duty control of civilian institutions is rejected, while retired officers are more acceptable.	Civilian supremacy is understood through formal status and procedure.
Disaster response	Military involvement is valued for speed, logistics, coordination, and emergency capacity.	Functional performance can increase military-derived legitimacy in civilian governance.
Symbols and discipline	Uniforms, hierarchy, command language, discipline, and decisiveness are adopted by civilians.	Military-derived styles become resources for authority and organizational credibility.
Historical and post-conflict memory	Security institutions and military advisers are linked to reassurance, crisis management, and longer local traditions of political authority.	Civilian militarism is reinforced by post-conflict experience and cultural memory, not only recent national politics.

Source: Interview data and authors' analysis, 2025.

Military-Derived Symbols and Leadership in Civilian Institutions

The interviews also identified a visible cultural dimension of militarism. Respondents described civilian organizations, mass organizations, and some government circles as using uniforms resembling military attire, camouflage patterns, insignia, hierarchical arrangements, and command-oriented styles of communication. These practices were not presented as accidental imitation. They were understood as deliberate ways of communicating strength, discipline, seriousness, and authority.

Interview evidence for the symbolic dimension consisted of participants' descriptions of military-style uniforms, camouflage patterns, insignia, hierarchical arrangements, and command-oriented communication in civilian organizations and

some government settings. Participants associated these practices with seriousness, strength, discipline, and organizational credibility. The analysis therefore treats militaristic symbolism as a civilian performance of authority rather than as evidence of direct military institutional control.

This pattern is important because the actors reproducing militaristic styles are civilians. Their behavior does not require institutional military intervention. Civilian militarism works through selective appropriation: civilians borrow symbols and organizational practices associated with the military because those practices already carry social meaning. Contemporary research on militarisation stresses that the process can be sustained through public discourse and civilian legitimisation rather than only through direct military action (Gunawan, 2024; Kuehn & Levy, 2021). The broader literature also shows how military organizational identities and gendered ideas of authority are reproduced through symbols, routines, and leadership cultures (Aktaş et al., 2023; Lonergan & Snyder, 2025).

Respondents commonly contrasted military discipline with what they perceived as disorder, weak coordination, or poor accountability in civilian institutions. This comparison gives military-derived discipline a moral quality: it becomes a benchmark for how government should work. The appeal is understandable where citizens and officials face slow bureaucracy or fragmented administration. Yet the political consequence depends on what is imported together with discipline. Efficiency and clear responsibility can strengthen government, but rigid hierarchy and command can also reduce space for debate, dissent, and collaborative problem-solving. This is why civilian militarism is better understood as an ambivalent governance practice rather than as either inherently effective or inherently authoritarian.

Post-Conflict Memory, Security Narratives, and Local Historical Legitimacy

North Maluku's social and political history provides another explanation for the appeal of military-derived authority. Participants referred to the province's communal-conflict experience and the continuing importance of social heterogeneity, geographic distance, and vulnerability to disruption. Although large-scale conflict has receded, memories of insecurity continue to shape expectations of government. In this environment, security institutions can symbolize reassurance and predictability even when citizens support democratic civilian rule.

A distinctive interview with the Sultan of Ternate added a longer historical layer. The respondent described military advisers as part of earlier traditions of political authority and sovereign decision-making, especially in matters of defence and survival. The significance of this account is not that contemporary governance simply reproduces precolonial institutions. Rather, it shows that military authority can be legitimized through cultural narratives that predate the New Order and

Reformasi. Civilian militarism therefore draws from multiple historical sources: authoritarian memory, post-conflict experience, security needs, and local narratives of political order.

The Sultan of Ternate interview provides context-specific evidence for historical legitimation: military advisers were described as part of older traditions of sovereign decision-making in matters of defence and survival. This account is used to illuminate one historical narrative available in the North Maluku case, not to claim that contemporary institutions directly reproduce earlier political structures.

This contextual finding supports the argument that civil-military relations cannot be reduced to a universal institutional formula. Comparative research shows that democratic control is shaped by historical trajectories, perceived threats, and the political legitimacy attached to military institutions (Banerjee & Webeck, 2024; Fathullah et al., 2021). Rugian et al. (2022) similarly demonstrate, in the different case of Myanmar, how historical military involvement can shape the trajectory of democratic rule. In Indonesia, the institutional setting is markedly different, but the North Maluku case shows that historical memory still influences how civilians interpret authority and security.

Civilian Militarism as a Democratic Governance Paradox

Taken together, the findings reveal a governance paradox. Civilian actors support formal civilian supremacy but simultaneously reproduce military-derived authority within civilian spaces. The paradox is possible because respondents distinguish between the military as an institution and militaristic attributes as social resources. They may oppose active-duty officers in civilian positions while admiring discipline, hierarchy, command, uniforms, or decisive leadership. As a result, the cultural influence of militarism can persist even when formal military political control is limited.

This finding extends the study of civil-military relations in two ways. First, it shifts attention from military agency to civilian agency. Recent Indonesian scholarship has shown how legal reform, parliamentary oversight, defence institutions, and military-law debates influence civilian control (Djuyandi et al., 2025a, 2025b; Gunawan, 2024; Nalle, 2026). The present study adds that civilians can themselves become agents of militarisation by defining military-derived styles as desirable forms of leadership. Second, it shows that the political significance of militarism is not confined to national institutions. It is produced in local governance, organizational practice, public symbolism, and everyday interpretations of effective authority.

The consequences for democratic governance are mixed. Militaristic discipline can support coordination, punctuality, responsibility, and emergency action. These qualities may be attractive where civilian bureaucracies are perceived

as fragmented. Yet democratic government requires more than administrative speed. It also depends on participation, accountability, transparency, reason-giving, and the ability to manage disagreement. Governance approaches centered on co-creation emphasize that complex public problems often require collaboration among government and societal actors rather than one-directional command (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). In this sense, the problem is not discipline itself but the normalization of command as the primary model of legitimate civilian leadership.

Importantly, these findings do not demonstrate that civilian militarism has caused democratic decline in North Maluku or Indonesia. The interviews do not measure longitudinal changes in participation, accountability, civil liberties, or regime quality. They instead identify a governance tension in participants' accounts: military-derived discipline and coordination can be valued for administrative or emergency effectiveness, while command-oriented authority may sit uneasily with deliberative and accountable practices when institutional safeguards are weak. The democratic implications are therefore framed as conditional and interpretive rather than causal.

The comparison with recent JPP research on institutional accountability is useful. Sinaga and Hulwanullah (2025) show, in the context of policing, that public legitimacy can be distorted when institutional processes are overly responsive to external pressure rather than stable professional rules. Although the institution and issue differ from the present study, both cases highlight a broader governance principle: security-sector legitimacy must be anchored in accountable institutions, not only in perceptions of decisiveness or effectiveness. Civilian government therefore needs to demonstrate that democratic procedures can also produce order, responsiveness, and credible leadership.

Civilian militarism should consequently be understood as a hybrid post-Reform condition. It does not indicate a simple return to New Order military dominance, but neither does it represent complete cultural demilitarization. The military's formal political role has changed, while military-derived ideas of discipline and authority remain socially available to civilian actors. The durability of these ideas helps explain why civil-military reform can progress institutionally while militaristic imaginaries persist culturally.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that civilian militarism in North Maluku is produced through a combination of institutional boundary-making, functional performance, symbolic appropriation, and historical memory. Civilian actors generally reject active-duty military control of civilian institutions, yet they are more accepting of retired officers and military participation in disaster response under defined conditions. At the same time, civilians selectively adopt military-derived symbols,

discipline, hierarchy, and decisiveness as resources for authority and organizational credibility. These practices are reinforced by post-conflict memories, security narratives, and local historical understandings of political order.

The central implication is therefore interpretive rather than causal. The North Maluku evidence does not demonstrate that civilian militarism weakens democracy at the national level. It shows that participants can value military-derived discipline, hierarchy, and emergency capacity while also endorsing formal civilian supremacy, creating a potential tension between command-oriented authority and deliberative, accountable governance. Whether that tension produces adverse democratic outcomes depends on institutional rules, oversight, civilian capacity, and the context in which military-derived practices are used. Policy implications should accordingly focus on clear role boundaries, capable civilian administration, transparent oversight, and professional disaster-management institutions without treating military-derived efficiency as a substitute for democratic legitimacy.

This study has several limitations. First, it is a single-province qualitative case study, so its findings are analytically transferable rather than statistically generalizable to Indonesia as a whole. Second, purposive sampling focuses on actors with influence over local governance and public discourse and therefore does not represent population-level public opinion. Third, the interviews capture interpretations during September–October 2025 and cannot establish change over time or causal effects on democratic quality. Fourth, the study relies primarily on interview accounts and field notes rather than systematic longitudinal observation of civilian organizations. The democratic implications should therefore be read as case-bounded interpretations of authority and governance, not as direct measurements of democratic erosion.

Future research should compare civilian militarism across Indonesian provinces, include a wider range of social groups, and combine interviews with observation of organizational practices and public communication. Longitudinal work would also help determine whether the appeal of military-derived authority declines as civilian institutions strengthen or instead becomes a stable feature of post-Reform political culture.

PRACTICAL & THEORETICAL IMPLICATION

Practically, the findings suggest four priorities for government and public institutions. First, rules concerning active-duty military participation in civilian administration should remain clear, transparent, and consistently applied. Second, local governments should strengthen civilian capacity in emergency logistics, inter-agency coordination, and crisis leadership so that military assistance supplements rather than substitutes for civilian institutions. Third, leadership development in the bureaucracy should promote discipline and decisiveness together with

accountability, participation, and evidence-based decision-making. Fourth, civil society and media can support democratic civilian authority by evaluating government effectiveness through transparent performance standards rather than by equating effective leadership with military style. These priorities are consistent with the broader need to balance effectiveness and democratic control in civil-military relations (Ng & Kurniawan, 2024; Haripin et al., 2023).

Theoretically, the study adapts civilian militarism as a governance-oriented extension of civil-military relations rather than treating the term as newly coined. Building on Rodriguez (2018, 2026), it asks how civilians themselves reproduce military-derived authority inside formally civilian settings. Conventional approaches often begin with the question of how civilians control the military; the present findings add the reverse cultural process of how civilian actors authorize, appropriate, and normalize military-derived styles. In the North Maluku case, this shifts analysis from institutional intrusion alone to symbolic circulation, functional legitimacy, and historical memory. The contribution is therefore to specify a locally grounded mechanism through which institutional demilitarization and cultural militarisation can move in different directions without presuming that such divergence automatically constitutes democratic breakdown.

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