

US lets Indonesia's Prabowo off the hook

US lifts rights-related visa ban on Indonesia's defense minister in a strategic mending of fences



Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto takes aim in a file photo. Image: Facebook

By JOHN MCBETH
OCTOBER 12, 2020

JAKARTA – The United States has after two decades finally issued a visa to Indonesian Defense Minister Prabowo Subianto, a diplomatic move that aims to mend fences as Washington seeks to build a regional coalition of like-minded allies against China.

Currently the front-runner in the 2024 presidential race, Prabowo had in effect been blacklisted since taking command responsibility for the kidnapping and torture of pro-democracy activists in the dying days of the late president Suharto's New Order regime.

The rehabilitation of the retired special forces general has been pushed by two key figures in US President Donald Trump's administration, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Defense Secretary Mark Esper, in one of their last acts before the forthcoming US presidential election after which they may both be out of a job.

Esper, who has developed a warm relationship with Prabowo, had announced last July his intention to visit Indonesia, but that was recently replaced by an invitation for the minister to travel to Washington instead for scheduled bilateral talks this week on future defense cooperation.

Prabowo has prospered since President Joko Widodo surprisingly brought his presidential rival into the cabinet after last year's bitterly fought campaign, which saw the Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra) leader lose by 10% of the vote.

According to government sources, Widodo's senior political adviser, Maritime Coordinating Minister Luhut Panjaitan, told Pompeo during a meeting after Prabowo's appointment that Indonesia would never buy US military hardware as long as the visa ban remained in place.

But that clearly comes second to Washington's efforts to get Indonesia and other key members of the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) to come on board in Washington's growing struggle for power and influence with China in the South China Sea and beyond.

"There's a lot of pressure on Indonesia to take sides," says one regional affairs specialist, noting that Esper heads at least one part of the Trump administration that appears to be functioning normally. "The Americans have really been pushing it."

Interestingly, as Prabowo headed for Washington, Panjaitan was meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Yunan for discussions on trade and investment, health, education and research and the development of a Covid-19 vaccine.

Citing confidentiality issues, the US State Department has never disclosed whether Prabowo has been on an official blacklist. But it is understood the word was passed through back channels advising him not to apply for a visa to avoid embarrassment.

Then Suharto's ambitious son-in-law, which allowed him to behave in a way that earned him a host of enemies among superior officers, Prabowo had long been under a cloud over alleged human-rights abuses in East Timor, when he served there in the early 1980s.

Most of the accusations centered specifically on the massacre of 55 people on Mount Bibileo, northwest of Viqueque, in September 1983, reportedly perpetrated by troops under Prabowo's command during a sustained counterinsurgency campaign against Falintil guerrillas.

Over subsequent years, he rose swiftly through the ranks on a career path that many thought marked him as a future president. But all that fell apart with the 1997-98 financial crisis and the subsequent downfall of the New Order government.

A day after Suharto's resignation on May 21, 1998, Prabowo barged into the office of interim president B J Habibie demanding the removal of his bitter rival, armed forces chief General

Wiranto, and other changes in the military hierarchy he claimed were part of a deal he had reached with Suharto's successor.

He has always denied claims his actions at the time amounted to a coup attempt. In fact, in later years he bristled at suggestions that his inability to secure a US visa put him on the same level as Major-General Manoon Roopkachorn, the leader of Thailand's abortive 1981 and 1985 coups.

Wiranto has always claimed he saved Indonesia's democracy, but neither he nor Prabowo, then the head of the 25,000-man Army Strategic Command (Kostrad), had the support that would have been required to avoid a bloody standoff and a drift into civil war.

Accused of insubordination and the abduction and mistreatment of political activists, none of whom presented a threat to the Suharto government, Prabowo was subsequently dismissed from the army by a military honor council and went into several years of self-exile in Jordan.

Although he accepted responsibility for the actions of the so-called Team Rose, the special forces unit that carried out the abductions, Prabowo has always denied he exceeded his orders and says the kidnappings were intended to put a stop to a feared bombing campaign by radical elements in the protest movement.

The real motivation, however, is believed to have been an effort to head off demonstrations disrupting the March 1998 People's Legislative Assembly (MPR) session, which rubber-stamped a futile, short-lived extension to Suharto's 32-year rule.

Former student leader Pius Listrilunang, the first to be abducted and the last to be released, says no more than eight other activists were ever in Team Rose's custody and that all were released during his eight-week confinement at a special forces base in South Jakarta.

He has been unable to explain, however, what happened to three of the activists who disappeared after initially gaining their freedom. They are among nine other prisoners still listed as missing after apparently being seized by Jakarta Regional Command operatives about the same time.

Listrilunang and Prabowo reconciled at a little-known meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1999, where the general apologized for his mistreatment. The former detainee joined Gerindra when it was formed in 2008 and later served two terms in the House of Representatives between 2009 and 2019.

In 2000, the State Department provided no explanation for denying Prabowo a visa to attend his son's graduation in Boston. But he blamed it on allegations, again unproven, that he instigated the riots that killed as many as 1,000 people in the days leading up to Suharto's resignation, many of them in burned-out supermarkets.

Since his return to political life, Prabowo has in essence played by the rules, though some of his behavior and statements during one vice-presidential and two presidential campaigns have been seized on by his critics as evidence that he is a threat to democratic rule.

Certainly, his alignment with conservative Muslim groups in last year's presidential election demonstrated once again the lengths he is prepared to go to for political expediency. His initial refusal to accept the result led to several days of riots on Jakarta streets.

By bringing Prabowo into his government, Widodo has cleared the way for him to become the frontrunner for the presidency in 2024, perhaps an additional reason senior US officials are now taking a more pragmatic view of his visa situation.

But at home, the president stirred controversy recently by approving the appointment of two former Team Rose members to senior Defense Ministry posts. The disbanded unit's commander, Chairawan Nusyirwan, who was also court-martialed in 1998, is one of Prabowo's special assistants.

As defense minister, Prabowo has pointedly refused to consider procurement of a late-model version of the F-16 fighter, which makes up three of Indonesia's frontline strike squadrons. The fighters are currently carrying out regular patrols over the Natuna islands, the scene of a spate of Chinese incursions.

But with Widodo worried about drawing US sanctions, the minister has also deferred the planned purchase of new Russia-made Sukhoi-35 jets to add to the 15 Su-27/30s in the air force's inventory, which Indonesia was forced to turn to during a 15-year US arms embargo imposed in response to rights abuses in East Timor.

Officials say Prabowo's interest now is in buying Boeing's twin-rotor CH-47 Chinooks. Given their value in natural disasters, the heavy-lift helicopters would make a lot more sense than Indonesia's most recent purchase of eight AH-64 Apache gunships, a \$700 million deal that only seemed designed to keep up with the neighbors.

Although he comes from strictly an army background, the Western-educated Prabowo is more of a strategic thinker than many of his predecessors, seeing upgraded equipment for the navy and air force as far more important to meeting Indonesia's future defense needs.

https://asiatimes.com/2020/10/us-lets-indonesias-prabowo-off-the-hook/?mc_cid=48be5a29e0&mc_eid=6c784d6d0c