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According to Makaarim the establishment of pro-Jakarta militias began in 2001. He recalled a leaked Home Ministry document of that year, which detailed the government's decision to mobilize all elements in Papua to weaken separatist groups there.

The document also mentioned the establishment of groups, including *Laskar Merah-Putih*, Makaarim said. While the plans were years old, it seems that they have only recently been dusted off and put into action.

Despite this, the military and peace activists agree on one thing: that the desire to participate in an armed independence struggle is currently low among the indigenous population. Trikora Military Commander Maj. Gen. Zamroni recently estimated that only 6 percent of native Papuans would be willing to participate in an armed conflict. But if this is true, then there is little justification for the increased military presence that some senior TNI figures are pushing for.

Makaarim says separatist issues are being politicized by certain groups. "I would say that [an armed] separatist movement barely exists. The pro-independence group the Free Papua Organization (OPM) is nowhere near as solid as those that used to exist in Aceh," he said, referring to the Free Aceh Movement (GAM).

"Problems in Papua are merely about the rights to exploit the huge natural resources in the area and political rivalry being played out from Jakarta," he added.

It is clear that if the Indonesian government is genuinely concerned with development in Papua, it will have to make serious efforts to bring the TNI and police under control. However, with leaders like Siagian in control, peace in the area seems anything but certain.

Testing times for KPU candidates

Two years out from the national legislative and presidential elections, preparations for this "festival of democracy" are already underway. But if the recent news regarding the selection process for National Election Commission (KPU) members is anything to go by, the road ahead will be paved with controversy.

It is not an overstatement to say that the success of the 2009 elections depends hugely on the KPU. Mandated by law to administer every aspect of the polls—from registering voters, to regulating campaigns, to vote-counting—the KPU has a huge and extremely complex task ahead of it in a country of 150 million voters.

Choosing the seven commissioners who will manage this important institution is therefore a crucial first step in ensuring the credibility of 2009.

Earlier this year, the initial 545 candidates who applied for the job were whittled down to 260 after an initial administrative selection phase. However,

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it was only after the results of the second selection were made public on July 31 that questions began to be raised about the process.

The main source of contention is that many apparently qualified candidates failed this second round, which included a psychometric test.

Its critics note that those candidates that failed round two included two current KPU commissioners with experience of administering the 2004 polls. Others that were shown the door included respected political analysts and NGO members with track records in election monitoring.

“The selection team does not understand the purpose and function of the KPU in the 2009 elections,” Ray Rangkuti of Indonesian NGO Lingkar Madani, recently told the press.

“They are searching for KPU commissioners in the same way as they would a company manager … they should be looking for people who can understand the technicalities of elections. Experience in managing and adapting national politics should be the priority when sifting candidates,” he added.

Some national-level politicians are also wondering out loud whether the selection team is doing a good job. Perhaps the most prominent is House of Representatives (DPR) Speaker Agung Laksono, who recently expressed his surprise at the results so far. “The DPR could accept the 21 names [from the selection team], but it could also reject them. The DPR will reject them if the basis of the selection process is not clear,” he said.

The selection team is due to present 21 names to the president and the House in September. The DPR will then choose the final seven names in a plenary session.

Further revelations that the test used to screen candidates was not created by the University of Indonesia, as had previously been reported, but by a company owned by a member of the selection panel, are only likely add to this dissatisfaction.

This all puts the future of the KPU between a rock and a hard place. If the suggestions made by the selection team are accepted by the DPR, then the KPU and the 2009 elections will be managed by commissioners with little previous experience. On the other hand the DPR could refuse to accept the names submitted by the team and insist on a whole new selection process, putting preparations for 2009 well behind schedule.

As the experience of 2004 showed, when time is short, mistakes are made. Last time around three KPU commissioners were jailed for corruption after violating procurement procedures, partly because there was not enough time to hold open tenders. This time around it remains to be seen whether those lessons have been learned.□