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Sukarno, the Army, and the PKI during the Guided Democracy Era: A Complex Triangular Relationship

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the dynamics of the triangle interaction of President Sukarno, the Indonesian Army, and the Communist Party of Indonesia during the Guided Democracy era, utilizing many new sources. The three predominant political entities that surfaced following the 1959 Presidential Decree not only offered political "direction" for that age but also illustrated a multifaceted triangle dynamic characterized by cooperation, competitiveness, and conflict. This research employs the four stages of the historical method to demonstrate that the political relationship among Sukarno, the Indonesian Army, and the Communist Party of Indonesia during the Guided Democracy era not only exhibited dynamic tensions but also culminated in the most catastrophic tragedy in the annals of independent Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

In the political history of Indonesia, the Era of Guided Democracy was not only synonymous with President Soekarno's "golden age," but also referred to the historical period of implementing the Nasakom policy, which was the unity of three major ideologies: *nasionalisme* (nationalism), *agama* (religion), and *komunisme* (communism). In terms of political parties, the Nasakom political scheme was represented by three major parties in the government: the PNI, representing nationalist forces, the NU, representing religious groups, and the PKI, representing communist groups.

Additionally, Guided Democracy was also considered a pivotal moment in the country's democratic history. The Presidential Decree of 5 July 1959, which reinstated the 1945 Constitution (UUD 1945) and dissolved the *Konstituante* (Constituent Assembly), not only marked the starting point for the functioning of the authoritarian political system in Indonesia but also shaped a new landscape of national politics whose impact is still felt today.

To date, numerous studies have been conducted on the Guided Democracy period. Classic studies on this period have been performed by multiple researchers from Indonesia and abroad. Among them are the works of Feith (1963), Lev (1966), Pauker (1969), Crouch (1978), Sundhaussen (1986), Maarif (2021), and Noer (2000). In *Dynamics of Guided Democracy*, Feith examined the dynamic relationship between President Sukarno and the military from 1959 to 1963 (Feith, 1963).

Harold Crouch, in one section of his study, also discusses the political history of Indonesia during the Guided Democracy period. In his book, The Army and Politics in Indonesia, Crouch discusses the Indonesian Army's involvement in the Indonesian political arena from the country's independence until the early New Order. Sundhaussen's study, *The Road to Power: Indonesian Military Politics 1945-1967*, also discusses the Guided Democracy period, with a greater proportion of the discussion focusing on post-Presidential Decree politics compared to the previous period (Crouch, 1978).

Temporally, perhaps Ahmad Syafii Maarif's study is more focused on the Guided Democracy era. Although the emphasis is on the political existence of Islam, in *Percaturan Islam dan Politik: Teori Belah Bambu Masa Demokrasi Terpimpin 1959-1965*, Maarif not only focuses on the role and political existence of Islam but also on the general dynamics of politics during the Guided Democracy period (Maarif, 2021).

Although not focused on the Guided Democracy period, Daniel S. Lev's study also provides a solid understanding of this period, during President Sukarno's "peak of glory." By providing a comprehensive discussion of national politics in the period preceding the 1959 Decree, the book *The Transition to Guided Democracy: Indonesian*

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Politics, 1957-1959 clearly gives readers a good understanding of the "gateway" to the period of authoritarianism in contemporary Indonesian history (Lev, 1966).

The following study is also related to the existence of political parties during the Guided Democracy period. Deliar Noer's study highlights explicitly the existence of Islamic parties in the dynamics of Indonesian politics, including the "Old Order" period. Noer thoroughly examines the decline in the role of religious parties in the political arena of Guided Democracy (Noer, 2000).

Besides Islamic parties, other major parties during Sukarno's era have also been the subject of study for several researchers. Guy J. Pauker, for example, examined the role and existence of the Indonesian Communist Party. With the title *The Rise and Fall of the Communist Party of Indonesia*, Pauker not only discusses the emergence of communism in Indonesia but also its collapse in the mid-1960s, particularly after the G30S tragedy, an event that, according to the military and Islamic groups, was orchestrated by the PKI (Pauker, 1969).

Meanwhile, recent studies are generally those published in scientific journals that typically address specific issues during the period of Guided Democracy. Among them, Himawan Indrajat's study *Demokrasi Terpimpin Sebuah Konsepsi Pemikiran Soekarno Tentang Demokrasi* discusses his views on the concept of democracy according to Soekarno, which is based on the personality of the Indonesian nation, not on Western political cultural values (Indrajat, 2016). Adi Surya Purba's study *Pemikiran politik Soekarno tentang Demokrasi Terpimpin* also discusses the history of Soekarno's thought, as the leading political figure during the Guided Democracy era (Purba, 2016). It highlights the political background that gave rise to Soekarno's thinking on democracy with distinctively Indonesian values. This study is based on the proposition that Sukarno rejected Parliamentary Democracy, which focused solely on political democracy without incorporating economic democracy.

Building on these analyses, studies on Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) political role during the same period provide a complementary perspective on how Islamic organizations adapted to Soekarno's ideological project. Rina Andriani Hidayat's research on *The Existence of the Nahdlatul Ulama Party in the Guided Democracy Era* reveals that NU's political transformation into the Partai Nahdlatul Ulama (PNU) was both a reaction to the limitations of parliamentary democracy and a strategic response to the new political environment fostered by Soekarno (Hidayat, 2022).

This interpretation aligns with the findings of Asep Hidayat et al. in *Nahdlatul Ulama in Facing the Guided Democracy 1959–1965: An Overview of Social and Political Factors*, who emphasize the socio-political pressures that compelled NU to engage with Soekarno's regime (Hidayat et al., 2022). Their study highlights that the growing strength of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) and its proximity to Soekarno pushed NU to participate in government to safeguard its constituency and counter communist influence. Thus, both Rina Andriani Hidayat and Asep Hidayat et al. reveal that NU's accommodation of Guided Democracy was not merely opportunistic but rather a strategic adaptation to the shifting political landscape—seeking to balance its religious mission with national stability.

Although not raising a new issue, this study (re)introduces one of the core themes in Guided Democracy politics: the triangular competition between Sukarno, the Indonesian Army, and the Indonesian Communist Party. This power triangle differs from the representation of political parties within the Nasakom ideological framework. This article will present new data that strengthens the analysis of the conflict and competition between the three main political forces.

METHOD

This study employs the historical method, which comprises four stages: heuristics (source/data collection), criticism, interpretation, and historiography. In the search and excavation of sources, the author prioritized secondary sources; however, certain parts of these sources contain types of historical information that have long been "buried" or are no longer widely used as a starting point for the study of Indonesian political history for the contemporary period. Among these authoritative references are the works of Feith, Crouch, Lev, Sundhaussen, Pauker, and Noer.

Primary sources consist of contemporary newspapers, such as *Duta Masjarakat* (affiliated with the Nahdlatul Ulama Party), *Harian Rakjat* (affiliated with the Indonesian Communist Party), *Kedaulatan Rakjat* (PNI), *Harian Umum*, and several other mass media outlets that reported not only the triangular conflict and competition between Sukarno, the military, and the PKI, but also the general political climate during the Guided Democracy era, particularly from the Presidential Decree on 5 July 1959, until the moments leading up to the outbreak of the 30 September Movement coup in 1965. Those classic media were obtained from the old newspaper collection section at the National Library in Jakarta.

After the materials are gathered, the next step is to conduct source criticism. Source criticism includes both internal and external criticism. External criticism begins by distinguishing between valid and less valid sources. Internal criticism involves reexamining existing sources.

The next step is interpretation, which involves finding logical connections between the research issue and historical data or information from primary and secondary sources. It can also be said that interpretation is the process of analyzing historical facts to construct historical arguments and narratives. The final stage is historiography, which involves writing the overall research findings. In other words, historiography is the synthesis and construction of history in written form.

The study of the Sukarno-PKI-AD triangle relationship can be examined using the concept and theory of political equilibrium as an essential mechanism for maintaining stability within a power system. Morgenthau (1948) stated that "the balance of power and policies aimed at its preservation are not only inevitable, but an essential stabilizing factor in a society of sovereign nations." In the context of Indonesian politics during the Guided Democracy era (1959–1965), this theory is relevant for explaining the triangular relationship between Sukarno, the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI), and the Army. Sukarno played the role of the central balancer, attempting to prevent any single political force from dominating the country. Through the concept of Nasakom (Nationalism, Religion, Communism), he integrated various political forces to support his position as the center of power.

Meanwhile, the PKI and the Army kept a close watch on each other and arrested each other in an effort to expand their influence. This situation creates a fragile and dynamic balance of power. When this balance was disrupted, leading up to the 30 September 1965 Movement, open conflict became unavoidable, ending the political structure of Guided Democracy.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Decades of Ideology: Pancasila, Nasakom, and Manipol USDEK

Guided Democracy was initially a reaction to the perceived "falseness" and divisive nature of the 1950s parliamentary government, as well as the fact that the parties failed to reach a consensus on the state's foundation. When the new authoritarian system was introduced, unifying ideologies for all elements of the nation were also affirmed as the basis for achieving national glory and the welfare of the people (Cribb & Kahin, 2004). From an ideological perspective, Guided Democracy not only showcased the ideological unity of Nasakom, but also the Manipol USDEK, an acronym for Manifesto Politik (Political Manifesto), *UUD 1945* (the 1945 Constitution), *Sosialisme Indonesia* (Indonesian-style Socialism), *Demokrasi Terpimpin* (Guided Democracy), *Ekonomi Terpimpin* (Guided Economy), and *Kepribadian Indonesia* (Indonesian Personality) (Pauker, 1969). The USDEK slogan has not only become a motto, but also a political "doctrine" of Guided Democracy, and has adorned various discourses in government, parties, mass media, and society. The Provisional People's Consultative Assembly (MPRS) even made Manipol USDEK the Broad Guidelines of the State (GBHN).

Although Nasakom and Manipol-USDEK dominated the country's ideological discourse, Pancasila still held a special place in the hearts of many. At this time, Pancasila, Nasakom, Manipol-USDEK, and "Revolution" were often used interchangeably. At one point, Bung Karno even "compared" the relationship between Pancasila and Manipol-USDEK to the relationship between the Quran and hadith. Regarding the revolution, Sukarno also stated that "the revolution is not yet complete." In fact, not only Nasakom, Manipol USDEK, and Pancasila, but Sukarno also had other slogans such as Gotong Royong (Mutual Cooperation), Building a New World, *Jalannya Revolusi Kita* (Jarek/Our Revolution's Path), and many others. Its negative counterparts are "free-war liberalism," "Dutch thinking," "textbook thinking," "individualism," and "reformism." Thru these symbols and slogans, an emotional connection was forged between the President and various segments of society, particularly some people from – to borrow Feith's term – the "expressive political" groups of political culture, who responded to radical and revolutionary symbols and often to nativist symbols, but also some people outside of political society, who were primarily interested in traditional cultural symbols (Feith, 1963).

Regarding Nasakom, it is widely understood that there were three major parties considered to represent the unity of those three main ideologies. PNI represented the nationalist element, NU represented the religious element, and PKI represented the communist element. However, there were essential figures in Sukarno's cabinet who considered the PKI a small party (*Berita Indonesia*, 19 Juli 1963). Smaller parties "adjusted," although there were also complaints about the "dominance" of the three major parties in the country's political discourse. For the

representation of nationalist ideology, the IPKI (Ikatan Pendukung Kemerdekaan Indonesia) party, for example, also felt it had the same right as the PNI to represent that group (Rocamora, 1991).

As the name suggests, Guided Democracy is characterized by restrictions on democratic life. Political parties are emasculated (Redfern, 2010). For their respective reasons, Masyumi, PSI, and even Murba were dissolved by the government. The parliament resulting from the election was also dissolved. Opposition outside of the parties is also silenced. Many political figures were arrested and imprisoned without trial. The mass media considered "counter-revolutionary" were banned. There were no elections during this period. The President appointed the existing parliament (DPR-Gotong Royong). Regarding the election, Sukarno said, "I will not hold an election if it will later divide the nation's unity, crack the nation's unity, and tear apart the chests of the Indonesian people." I will take responsibility for all of this to the people and to Allah Almighty (*Merdeka*, 29 August 1963).

The Triangle of Power: Cooperation, Competition, and Conflict

However, for a deeper understanding of the Guided Democracy period, we should not be fixated on mapping the parties considered to represent the three ideologies in the Nasakom scheme. As mentioned earlier, during this period, political parties were powerless elements, except for the PKI. Especially after the dissolution of Masyumi and PSI, as some of their leaders were involved in the PRRI/Permesta movement, the parties that still existed during this time were generally emasculated by the political authorities (Redfern, 2010). According to J. Reinhardt, the PKI was not the primary factor in late Guided Democracy politics; instead, they were domesticated by Sukarno's Javanized setting. The era was characterized by a shift towards traditional values and a "neo-prijaji" political system (Reinhardt, 1971).

Besides the Nasakom scheme, the narrative of Indonesian political history also portrays the Guided Democracy era as a triangular power structure: Sukarno, the Indonesian Army, and the Indonesian Communist Party. The existence of these three forces not only provided political "guidance" for Guided Democracy but also reflected the complex triangular relationship containing elements of cooperation, competition, and conflict (Angel, 1970).

Feith said that Soekarno and the Army, led by Nasution, were equal partners. Both were involved in a "stable conflict" characterized not only by joint efforts but also by constant competition and tension. Cooperation between the two has been ongoing since the imposition of martial law in 1957. Military law not only increased the legitimate military influence in civil affairs and justified the Army's implementation of authoritarian measures, but also marked the beginning of the Army's acceptance of Sukarno as a strong President (Feith, 1963).

This cooperation (Sukarno-Army) was partly mutually beneficial. Sukarno's importance in this partnership stems from his reputation and popularity as a leader, as well as his prestige and position as head of state, a legitimator of the government (Feith, 1963), particularly after the discrediting of liberal democracy and the regionalists' maneuvers. Furthermore, Sukarno's importance was reinforced by his claims as the leader of the Revolution, the voice of the people, and the nation's leading exponent. Another of Sukarno's strengths was his skill in "manipulating" ideological symbols and combining this with his ability to identify political forces and trends, as well as in balancing individuals and groups within the military and in the broader political arena to advance his own goals.

Conversely, the military is the most essential source of organized political power. They played a key role in the War of Independence, although under Parliamentary Democracy (1950s), their power was overshadowed by civilian leadership and the threat of internal division. However, as the civilian government became increasingly ineffective, the military stepped forward. Their reputation and position grew further when they legally acquired civil power under martial law and successfully suppressed regional movements. Although the prestige of military leadership increased, on the other hand, fears and opposition also arose against a pure military dictatorship, which ultimately necessitated Sukarno's presence in the post-parliamentary government leadership to ensure the legitimacy of the "authoritarian" regime. There is also a reasonably strong argument that the military, like the state, needed a unifying symbol, namely Sukarno, because, although relatively united, the Army was not a monolithic institution. The Army was previously unable to maintain unity when attempting to play a political role without assistance (from others) (Pauker, 1969).

Meanwhile, the relationship between Soekarno and the PKI during the Guided Democracy period reflected a model of reciprocal political exploitation. This is because, after the 1959 Decree reinstated the 1945 Constitution (*Harian Umum*, 6 July 1959), the PKI had become a far more influential party, surpassing all others. This party seems largely unaffected by the imposition of martial law following the political turmoil caused by regional uprisings. The PKI even benefited from the PRRI/Permesta rebellion that occurred in the late 1950s, despite the party not entering the Cabinet after the Decree until the following years.

In retrospect, following the Madiun Affair in 1948, the PKI adopted a slow and patient approach to becoming a mass party, choosing the "peaceful path" to power. Under the leadership of four young figures —Aidit, Lukman, Nyoto, and Sudisman —who controlled the PKI Politbiro in 1951, the party successfully maintained its new image and policy of collaboration with President Sukarno and the so-called "national bourgeoisie" until 1965 (Pauker, 1969).

According to Mortimer, Sukarno utilized the Communist Party to consolidate his own power, and conversely, the party leveraged Sukarno to enhance its own strength. The PKI became the most enthusiastic supporter of the President's nationalist creeds. The PKI became a group that Sukarno could use to counter the military in the political system and the most effective tool for mass mobilization, particularly through the National Front, to support the President's patriotic campaigns (Mortimer, 1974).

Therefore, Sukarno, who was worried, attempted to protect the PKI from Nasution and other anti-communist military leaders who sought to reduce the PKI's influence or dismantle the party. Sukarno intervened on several occasions to curb the military's anti-communist measures, while simultaneously conducting an increasingly vocal campaign against those who opposed the PKI (Mortimer, 1974; Nasution, 1984).

From the outset, Sukarno also actively promoted the increasing influence of the PKI. Unsurprisingly, in addition to the Sukarno-military partnership discussed above, there was also a Sukarno-PKI political alliance, with the latter receiving increasing priority, especially after 1962. On many occasions, Sukarno condemned those he considered "communism-phobic." In a speech titled "*Tahun Kemenangan*" (Takem) on 17 August 1962, Sukarno alluded to "*komunisme-phobia*" by saying, "Regarding Land Reform, for example, there are still people who insist that Indonesian Land Reform is 'not Communist Land Reform,'.... they are not reducing, but rather thickening communism-phobia, at least they themselves are still 'communism-phobic'.... There are still people who cannot think freely about what is good for the Indonesian people and what the Indonesian people want, but instead, they are a priori hateful and opposed to anything they suspect is left-wing and Communist." (Soekarno, 2018)

However, it should be noted that, although Sukarno spoke enthusiastically about the goodness of the Nasakom government since 1955, and the PKI also consistently demanded inclusion in the Cabinet, this never actually occurred (*Harian Rakjat*, 9 August 1963). This situation gave rise to speculation, as Crouch put it: Did Sukarno really want to implement it (the Nasakom government), or did he deliberately open up the possibility of a three-legged cabinet, but only as a mere possibility? At the very least, it can be stated that Sukarno's goal was to elevate the PKI's prestige, but he never achieved absolute power. For the PKI, this final step was permanently stalled, so the progress it had made during the six years of Guided Democracy, such as the increase in the number of supporting masses, seemed to mean little without participating in the government (Crouch, 1999).

Another interesting point to consider in this context is whether Sukarno's various activities and maneuvers promoted the PKI and immediately indicated that he was also a communist, or whether he consciously promoted communist advancement as an end in itself. It is more likely that Sukarno promoted the PKI to the extent necessary for his own political goals (Crouch, 1999). In a speech to students at the University of the Philippines in August 1963, Sukarno claimed he was not a communist, but a *Pancasilais*. The claim that Indonesia is a communist country and that Sukarno is a communist is propaganda deliberately spread by Western media. "Am I a communist because I believe in the One God? ...If people say I'm a communist, fine, but I'm not a communist in the usual sense of the word. I am a Pancasilais! I only work for the people of Indonesia. And I work hard for that." (*Kedaulatan Rakyat*, 14 August 1963; see also *Berita Indonesia*, 14 August 1963).

The conflict and competition between the PKI and the Army had become a historical reality. For the PKI, if President Sukarno was its primary protector during the Guided Democracy period, then the Army was its main enemy (Mortimer, 1974). From the outset, the army leadership itself also considered the PKI its true enemy and wanted to limit the party's growth and development.

In the mid-1960s, the PKI had a negative experience of being suppressed by the military. When they presented a critical evaluation of the Cabinet, some PKI leaders, including DN Aidit and Nyoto, were interrogated by army intelligence officers. Another PKI figure, Sukirman, was even arrested. Sukarno immediately intervened and asked Nasution to release the top officials of the communist party. Meanwhile, some regional commanders continued their activities against the PKI. In August 1960, the PKI was banned in North Sumatra, South Kalimantan, South Sulawesi, and its activities were restricted in East Java. Sukarno intervened again, and although there were feelings within the Army against the president's policy toward the PKI, Nasution decided to yield to the president's wishes. At the end of that year, bans were also issued in two regions. Although the third commander postponed similar action until August

of the following year, Colonel Sukendro, known as the main initiator of the anti-PKI movements, was removed from his position and sent abroad (Crouch, 1999).

Facing the PKI, the Army received support from other anti-communist groups, especially the santri Islamic groups. After anti-Communist parties like Masyumi and PSI were dissolved by Sukarno in August 1960, the army "transformed" into the vanguard of anti-Communist forces. This development has influenced the dynamics of the Army's relationship with the President (Said, 2018). NU maintained its existence by supporting Sukarno's policies, motivated by dissatisfaction with Masyumi Party policies (Hidayat, 2022). NU engaged with President Soekarno's guided democracy due to the strong presence of the PKI and to maintain its government position, aiming to protect Muslim interests (Hidayat et al., 2022).

The hostility of military officers and santri toward the PKI stems from the Madiun tragedy of 1948. Communists and santri were slaughtering each other at that time, while the Army saw the rebellion as treason against the new nation (Federspiel, 1973). Army officials viewed the PKI as a dangerous political force, an anti-national party subservient to international goals and controlled by foreign powers. Unlike the President, Army leaders were reluctant to accept the fact that the PKI could be integrated into the existing political system. Military leaders like Nasution also hated the PKI because the party's atheistic ideology insulted and belittled their religious beliefs. From another perspective, the PKI was also seen as a latent threat because it possessed high qualities in organizational ability, militancy, and strong dedication to its struggle's goals (Mortimer, 1974).

In subsequent developments, the PKI frequently attacked military officers and agitated against other anti-communist groups. In 1965, for example, the PKI attacked those it called "bureaucratic capitalists" who controlled Dutch companies seized at the end of 1957, as well as santri landlords. However, in general, during Guided Democracy, the Army was also an institution that was difficult for the PKI to attack in its political scheme. Beyond the prohibitions and gossip directed at the party by Army officials, this military organization also did not allow itself to be swept up in the political rhythm set by the Communists (Mortimer, 1974).

In contrast, the lower ranks of the Army, unlike its officers, were treated by the communists as part of the people, often depicted in PKI literature as "farmers in uniform." Their living conditions and status justify this label. The PKI believed that these subordinate soldiers were still willing to listen to the party's voice, so the anti-Communist, elite lifestyles of their officers could still be targeted. The party claimed to have received no less than 30 percent of the votes from these enlisted men in the 1955 general election, a proportion far higher than that achieved by any other party. Although the party's votes were assumed to come from counting the pockets of troops who were lenient toward the party, this fact shows that the party's influence has indeed increased, both horizontally and vertically.

While the initial conflict between the PKI and the Army was a struggle for influence between two incompatible forces, over time, this conflict evolved into a power struggle, especially as Sukarno aged and his health appeared to decline. It seems pretty clear that once Sukarno, who served as a balancing force, was no longer part of the leadership, control of the Guided Democracy system could (predictably) only shift to one of these two main competitors.

However, in the competition between the PKI and the TNI, the military clearly had an initial advantage. The Indonesian National Army (TNI) was formed as part of the Guided Democracy leadership, although it did not have a monopoly on power. In terms of armed forces, it will certainly not face effective competitors either. Therefore, the army leadership competed from a position of actual power, and its task was to maintain and, if possible, increase that power, while resisting any advances in influence (politically or within the armed forces) by the PKI or Sukarno.

CONCLUSION

The Guided Democracy period differed in its power structure and political relationships compared to the Parliamentary Democracy period. With the exception of the PKI, political parties were essentially paralyzed, a state that had been developing since 1956. There are no general elections, and the existing parliament seems irrelevant to political developments.

De facto, political power at this time was divided among competing alliances between President Sukarno and the military. Individually, President Sukarno was the most powerful person, but the military was the most powerful institutionally. In 1960, particularly after the suppression of the PRRI rebellion and the dissolution of the Masyumi-PSI Party, the popularity of the PKI surged, becoming the core force in the Indonesian political landscape. In 1964, the influence of this left-wing party became increasingly prominent and vocal. The policy of confrontation with Malaysia,

for example, significantly boosted the popularity of the PKI. At this time, the PKI truly asserted its existence in its efforts to gain political power.

Therefore, in many narratives of Indonesian political history, the Guided Democracy period is depicted as a triangular power structure: Sukarno, the Indonesian Army, and the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI). The existence of these three political forces in supporting the Guided Democracy system is considered strange and antagonistic. This system could last for several years, mainly due to Sukarno's skill in "manipulating" the various fragmented political forces around him. Still, when that balance was disrupted, the antagonistic alliance turned into a very fierce conflict where one of the three elements emerged as the winner and the other two as losers.

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