

Indonesian authorities seize on Jakarta attack to strengthen detention powers

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Under the cover of responding to the January 14 attack in central Jakarta that left eight dead, including the four perpetrators, President Joko Widodo's government is bringing forward plans for stronger arrest powers and other "anti-terrorism" laws.

More fundamentally, the military-bureaucratic apparatus that has remained intact, behind the façade of democracy, since the 1998 fall of the Suharto dictatorship, is using the Jakarta attack to more openly assert its authority amid a deteriorating economic situation and rising social tensions.

These moves were swiftly underway, well before any of the facts and circumstances surrounding the attack were known.

After meeting with Widodo on January 18, Coordinating Minister for Security and Legal Affairs Luhut Panjaitan, a four-star general and business tycoon, told the media the national parliament would consider a series of new laws. These would include a provision to allow security forces to arrest someone if they alleged a "strong indication" that an act of terrorism might be in planning.

The January 14 attack took place in the city's Sarinah Mall near Starbucks and Burger King restaurants. Four men using firearms and grenades shot at police and passers-by and blew up a police post. Police originally said there were five attackers, but one of the dead was subsequently identified as a bystander. Twenty people were reported injured.

The attack appeared to be poorly planned and executed. The perpetrators ran into a nearby police operation that quickly saw the gang overcome by large numbers of police. The assault lacked the scale and organisation of November's Paris attacks, in which 130 people were murdered and scores seriously injured.

According to media reports, a spokesman for the

Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed responsibility. Allegations were directed against Indonesian national Bahrin Naim, who has reportedly been with ISIS in Syria since last year and who posted a blog entitled "Lessons from the Paris Attacks" for Indonesian Islamists.

Western media and governments declared that the attack showed ISIS was extending its activities into the world's most populous Muslim country. A January 20 article in the *Wall Street Journal* called the attack "another grim reminder that no place is safe from the threat of Islamic State."

Both Washington and Canberra, which have been closely involved in training Jakarta's military special forces, offered increased cooperation. The US and its allies have been intensifying their links with the Indonesian military, police and intelligence forces, seeking to make Jakarta a fully committed partner in Washington's "pivot to Asia" to confront China.

Domestically, the speed with which the proposed legal changes were made public indicates that these have been planned for some time. All involve expanding the powers of the police and the national intelligence agency (BIN). They include outlawing joining ISIS in the Middle East, revoking the citizenship of people accused of doing so and detaining without charge suspects for more than a week. That power to make pre-emptive arrests would be extended from the police to the notorious BIN.

Since 2002, under regulations adopted by President Megawati Sukarnoputri after the Bali terrorist attacks, police have had powers to arrest suspected terrorists for seven days and then detain them for six months for questioning and prosecution, as well as to intercept mail and tap communications.

Speaking after the attacks, BIN chief Sutiyoso said

Indonesia must copy Western countries that “prioritise the intelligence process” over legal rights when “national security” is at stake. Thus, the Indonesian authorities, representing the military-business apparatus, are exploiting the anti-democratic “emergency” measures introduced in the so-called Western democracies as precedents for their own police-state moves.

A report in the *Financial Times* on January 20 said government officials were discussing a community watch system that resembles the *Siskamling* scheme under the pre-1998 Suharto junta, which created a role for local gangs in supporting the security forces.

This is highly significant because of the abuse and violence inflicted on the population by the security forces, in particular the army, during the three-decades-long Suharto military dictatorship.

All the parties that dominate the Jakarta establishment today, including Widodo’s and Megawati’s Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle, are either directly connected to the Suharto junta or collaborated with it.

Under Widodo, the military has been working its way back into internal security operations. A *Foreign Affairs* article in September noted the army’s involvement in “patriotic education and civic-orientated projects” and the expansion of its Territorial Command and counter-terrorism role. The army has signed agreements with government ministries and state companies to provide security for railways, airports and bus stations.

Since his inauguration in 2014, Widodo has moved closer to the army hierarchy. By appointing an army general as head of the armed forces (TNI) in July, Widodo broke with the tradition set since the fall of the Suharto junta of rotating it with the navy and air force command as a restraint on the once all-powerful army.

While international media outlets have praised Widodo’s response to the “terror threat,” they have insisted that his presidency must proceed with similar ruthlessness in implementing pro-market economic “reforms.” With the Indonesian and global economy slumping, the government is under considerable pressure from the global financial markets to impose unpopular measures, such as privatisations and labour market deregulation.

The *Wall Street Journal* report on January 20, written

by two financial consultants, declared: “Businessmen hope that as Mr. Widodo tackles terrorism, he won’t delay on other pressing matters related to his economic management.” It warned Widodo that investors were being won by “business-friendly destinations in Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam.” The article concluded: “The awful events last week were an important reminder about the need for vigilance. But economic reform must remain Mr. Widodo’s priority.”

Indonesia has slipped below a 5 percent economic growth rate this year, underscoring its vulnerability to falling commodity prices and deepening world recessionary tendencies. The weak currency carries the danger of substantial capital outflows, especially with increases in US interest rates.

Social tensions are rising. About 65 percent of the population is of working age—some 121 million people—of whom 6 percent are officially unemployed. This figure does not take into account the unpaid and low-paid workers in the “informal” sector of the economy.

Beneath the cloak of combatting terrorism, the return to Suharto-era measures is a warning of the preparation of violent repression directed against the many-millioned working class as social and class struggles erupt.



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