

Indonesia: Student unrest continues as tens of thousands of workers set to strike

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Large student protests continued in Jakarta and other major Indonesian centres on Monday and Tuesday in defiance of violent police repression and strident denunciations by senior ministers in the government of President Joko Widodo.

The demonstrations, which grew last week to become some of the largest student mobilisations in two decades, are in opposition to attempts by the parliament to introduce a regressive new criminal code and the passage in September of legislation defanging the official anti-corruption body.

Protesters have also raised broader issues, including a call for an end to “militarism” in Papua and West Papua, amid a brutal army crackdown in those provinces, and demands for government action to put an end to massive peat fires that are enveloping the major cities with a toxic haze.

The protests have continued, despite Widodo’s postponement of any parliamentary vote on the criminal code, which includes a raft of anti-democratic measures criminalising various sexual activities, and explicitly anti-communist provisions.

On Monday afternoon, thousands of student and youth protesters marched towards the House of Representatives compound in central Jakarta. Unlike during rallies the previous week, they were blocked from approaching the building by police barricades and heavily-armed officers. The protest coincided with the final plenary session of the parliamentary body, for the 2014 to 2019 term.

During the clashes that ensued when protesters sought to breach the barricade, hundreds were injured, while hundreds more were detained. Police allegedly used a barrage of tear gas to disperse the demonstrators, prompting mass panic.

Jakarta authorities acknowledged 210 injuries. A

hospital spokesman told the *Jakarta Post* that 38 of those wounded were taken to Pertamina Hospital in South Jakarta. In an indication of the demographics of the emerging movement, 22 of them were university students and nine were high school pupils.

Skirmishes continued into the evening, with police claiming that protesters threw rocks at them and resisted dispersal. The following day, authorities announced that they had arrested some 519 people, who were being subjected to questioning to determine whether or not they were students.

The mass-roundup follows police violence last week, including arrests of prominent artists critical of the government and a brutal crackdown on protests. Police agencies have also been scouring social media to identify “troublemakers.”

On Thursday, two students were killed in the town of Kendari in South Sulawesi, after police attacked demonstrations there. While the exact circumstances of their deaths are not clear, one of the students was shot and another had received major head injuries. The fatalities occurred the same day that Amnesty International Indonesia called for an urgent investigation into “mass police violence” against the demonstrations.

The government has responded by branding the protesters as “rioters,” and accusing them of seeking to disrupt the ceremonial presidential and parliamentary inaugurations that occurred earlier this week.

Attempts to dampen-down the unrest, however, may be further complicated by plans by tens of thousands of workers to take strike and protest action on Wednesday next week.

The Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions and the Confederation of All Indonesian Workers’ Union (KSPI) announced the stoppage on Tuesday after

closed-room talks with Widodo. The union has stated that it will mobilise up to 50,000 workers outside the parliament in Jakarta, and another 100,000 across the archipelago.

The action has been called in opposition to industrial laws, which have repressed wages and led to the victimisation of workers seeking to fight for their social and democratic rights. The union body clearly felt compelled to announce the stoppage as a result of explosive social anger over working conditions and vast social inequality.

The unions, however, are an active participant in the sordid intrigues of official politics. The KSPI supported Widodo's opponent, Prabowo Subianto, during presidential elections earlier this year. Since Widodo's victory, union leaders have pledged their fealty to the president.

Even when announcing next Wednesday's action, the KSPI declared that it would work "as a team" with the administration, and boasted of its backing for pro-business measures to "build good investment climate." The unions appear to be seeking a greater role, including positions, within the state labour apparatus.

The jockeying coincides with broader infighting within the Indonesian ruling elite, following the rancorous presidential contest. Subianto, a former army general, won substantial support from sections of the military and made a pitch to conservative Islamist forces, whose political prominence has grown in recent years. The new criminal code panders to these forces, by seeking to uphold monogamy, marital fidelity and other religious values.

At the same time, Widodo's posture as an "outsider," without the deep connections to the state apparatus and powerful political families, is unravelling after years of imposing the dictates of big business and international finance.

Various middle-class human rights organisations, which promoted Widodo's fraudulent claims to be a reformer, have criticised him during the latest unrest. These layers are, above all, perturbed that they have been sidelined in favour of the more established business and political elite.

Widodo has imposed a series of pro-business policies, including neutering the anti-corruption body, allowing the privatisation of water supplies and acceding to bills slashing regulations over corporate control of land and

natural resources. His government implemented a series of infrastructure projects aimed at attracting further international investment.

The president is under considerable pressure to press ahead with this pro-business agenda. His own party, the Democratic Party of Struggle, is pushing constitutional amendments that would require the president to follow a policy agenda mandated by the parliament.

The move is aimed at undermining any, even nominal public influence over presidential policy, and strengthening the grip of the family oligarchies that have controlled Indonesian politics for decades.

Commentators have also noted that the measure may be intended to create a means for the removal of a president unable to suppress social and political upheaval. Speaking to the *Australian* newspaper this week, Australian National University Indonesia expert Marcus Mietzner said the move was likely "an insurance policy for times in which they are not fully in control of the presidency—like now."



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