

Newly-inaugurated Indonesian president appoints notorious ex-general as defence minister

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The appointment of ex-general Prabowo Subianto to the post of Indonesian defence minister is a sharp warning that President Joko Widodo, who is beginning his second term in office, will not hesitate to use police-state repression as he accelerates his pro-market agenda.

Prabowo, Widodo's rival for the presidency in the 2014 and 2019 elections, has a long history of human rights abuses and was intimately connected to the bloody Suharto dictatorship which ruled Indonesia for three decades. Suharto came to power in a CIA-orchestrated military coup in 1965-66 that led to the slaughter of more than 500,000 workers, peasants and members of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

Prabowo was the dictator's son-in-law and head of the infamous Indonesian special forces known as Kopassus. Amid the emergence of mass opposition to the dictatorship in April-May 1998, he ordered the kidnapping of student leaders in a failed bid to keep Suharto in office. He is also implicated in atrocities in East Timor and Indonesian Papua.

In a cynical attempt to distance itself from the blood-stained Suharto dictatorship, the armed forces launched an inquiry into his conduct. While a panel of generals found that he had violated criminal law in abducting the student activists, some of whom were never found, he was dismissed from the army but not charged.

Prabowo proved to be a convenient scapegoat not only for the military but for the US government, which had backed Suharto to the hilt. Washington turned on Suharto amid the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis because his regime, notorious for its crony capitalism, was a barrier to international investors. Washington imposed a travel ban on Prabowo.

After his dismissal, Prabowo turned to business—using his connections to amass assets estimated at more than \$US150 million—and to politics. In the 2014 and 2019 presidential elections, he rested heavily on far-right, Islamist groups and the whipping up of Indonesian nationalism based on anti-Chinese and anti-Christian chauvinism.

Prabowo's appointment as defence minister is a devastating exposure of Widodo's posturing as a populist politician committed to democratic rights. Widodo's turn to Prabowo is an indication that the ruling elites in Jakarta are increasingly fearful that the global re-emergence of the class struggle will be expressed in mass opposition to the new government's austerity measures.

Last month, Widodo had already provoked large-scale protests by tens of thousands of people, led by university students, with his plans to implement a repressive new criminal code. The legislation would outlaw extra-marital sexual relations, impose penalties for "insulting" the president and other government executives, and ban associating with any group accused of being Marxist or communist. He has also refused to revoke a law seeking to neuter the country's corruption watchdog.

The proposed code, which was clearly pitched towards Prabowo and his Islamist supporters, is aimed at strengthening the state apparatus as Widodo presses ahead with his anti-working class economic agenda. At least 31,000 police and military personnel were mobilized in Jakarta last Sunday as Widodo was sworn in for his second, five-year term of office.

A campaign is also underway to change the constitution to end the direct election of the president,

which was implemented after Suharto's fall. Widodo's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) is among the political parties pushing for the restoration of the Suharto-era Broad Guidelines of State Policy that mandated parliament to select the president. If enacted, the change would end the present, very limited say that voters have in the country's tightly controlled presidential elections.

Widodo has pledged to boost economic growth by cutting corporate taxes and further opening up the economy, including by changing the country's negative investment list that limits foreign investment in various economic sectors. Earlier this month, he called for an overhaul of the labour laws—a signal that the government intends to remove limited legal protections for workers such as against arbitrary dismissal.

These policies, which will only benefit the wealthy elites, will heighten social tensions and lead to eruptions in a society already sharply divided between rich and poor. The richest 1 percent of the population owns 50 percent of national wealth; the richest 10 percent owns 77 percent.

Widodo claims that his policies will create jobs, but most new jobs are being created are low-paid and often casual. According to the World Bank, youth unemployment rates were nearly 20 percent last year.

Various commentators have referred to Widodo's transformation from a "man of the people"—an outsider to the Jakarta establishment who was promoted as an agent of progressive change—into a cynical political wheeler-and-dealer.

In reality, Widodo's path from furniture salesman, to Jakarta governor and then president has been backed at every step by powerful political figures who recognised the value of "an outsider" as the corrupt establishment became increasingly discredited. Prabowo himself supported Widodo in the 2012 election for Jakarta governor.

Former president Megawati Sukarnoputri supported Widodo as the candidate for her Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) in the 2014 presidential election when it became clear that she would not be able to win if she stood. Other backers included former Suharto era generals, ex-army commander Wiranto and ex-general A.M. Hendropriyono, former director of the National Intelligence Agency, who are implicated in the dictatorship's crimes.

Widodo's appointment of Prabowo is a stark demonstration that the ousting of Suharto in 1998 led to no fundamental changes to the state apparatus that had ruthlessly suppressed any opposition for decades. In the midst of the political upheaval that followed, the ruling class relied heavily on the toothless opposition parties permitted under the dictatorship, such as the PDI-P, to contain and defuse demands for basic democratic rights.

The *World Socialist Web Site* warned at the time that the political changes were largely cosmetic and aimed at keeping the repressive apparatus of the military junta intact for future use against the working class and rural masses. Now, as class struggles are once again on the agenda, the charade of democratic reform, or *reformasi*, is rapidly being dispensed with. That is the meaning of Widodo's embrace of Prabowo.



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