

Biden embraces Indonesia's incoming president and notorious Suharto-era general

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Last Friday, US President Joe Biden telephoned Indonesian President-elect Prabowo Subianto to congratulate him on his victory in the country's February election. Biden's open embrace of a former general implicated in numerous atrocities once again demonstrates the fraudulent claim that Washington defends democracy in the Indo-Pacific or anywhere else in the world.

The call took place after Indonesia's General Election Commission confirmed Prabowo's victory on March 20 with 58.6 percent of the vote. He is now slated to take office on October 20. According to a White House press release, Biden and Prabowo commended their countries for "celebrating 75 years of diplomatic relations grounded in shared values of democracy and pluralism."

Biden pledged to expand cooperation with Indonesia under the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, a partnership that also includes Japan, India, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and other Southeast Asian countries. He also stated his administration would deepen relations with Jakarta as part of their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. The press release stated that Biden and Prabowo plan to "work together towards an Indo-Pacific that is free, open, prosperous, and secure."

In an Instagram post, Prabowo wrote on Saturday that he was "deeply honoured" to receive Biden's congratulations. "I stand proud of the strong bond between Indonesia and the US forged over many years of friendship and cooperation," he said. "We are committed to continue and enhance this partnership between our two great nations, and I look forward to working with you in the future."

In real terms, Biden is whitewashing Prabowo's bloody past and the history of Indonesia's Suharto dictatorship as Washington continuously ramps up its plans for war with Beijing. The reference to a "free, open" Indo-Pacific is nothing more than a euphemism for its opposite, the

expansion of US hegemony at the expense of its rivals, particularly China, even if it means war.

Washington is making every effort to incorporate Indonesia into these plans, which includes building a system of military alliances to surround China. Prabowo's involvement in multiple atrocities in East Timor, West Papua, and Aceh Province as well as murderous repression against Indonesian activists at the end of the Suharto dictatorship are no barriers for US imperialism.

However, given its full support for the genocide Israel is conducting in Gaza, Washington is sensitive that its alliances with dictators and criminals are cutting across its claims to be the world's defender of democracy. In a press briefing on February 15 following the Indonesian election, White House national security spokesman John Kirby absurdly claimed of Biden, "There's not a conversation he has anywhere in the world with foreign leaders where he's not raising issues and concerns about human rights and civil rights. That's not going to change."

Biden of course did not raise the issue of "human rights" during his recent phone call with Prabowo, instead telling him that he was "happy to see Prabowo's achievements in the election and congratulated him on this victory," according to CNBC Indonesia.

Furthermore, the claim that the US and Indonesian relationship is built on "democracy and pluralism" is an absurd lie. Prabowo is a representative of the blood-soaked Suharto regime that came to power in the 1965 CIA-backed military coup. In its wake, up to one million members of the Indonesian Communist Party, workers, and peasants were slaughtered by military forces, right-wing militias, and armed thugs aided and abetted by US imperialism.

Prabowo played a prominent role in propping up the US-backed Suharto while serving as an officer in Indonesia's

special forces, known as Kopassus, from 1976 until 1998, including as its general commander from 1995 to 1998. Prabowo also often used the fact that he was married to the dictator's daughter, Titiek Suharto, and had the ear of Suharto to act with impunity.

Prabowo has been linked to bloody killings including the 1983 Kraras Massacre in East Timor that left more than 200 civilians and noncombatants dead during a supposed counterinsurgency operation. He is also linked to murderous reprisals in 1996 against West Papuan villagers who supposedly supported guerillas in the Free Papua Movement. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

Prabowo also likely had a role in instigating riots in 1998 as the Suharto regime was coming to an end under the pressure of anti-government protests and the Asian Financial Crisis. Hundreds were killed as Prabowo sought to prop up the crumbling regime with an eye to installing himself as dictator.

The secretive nature of special forces like Kopassus, specifically tasked with carrying out Suharto's dirty operations in the country, has allowed Prabowo to deny his involvement in these bloody affairs.

However, Prabowo has been directly linked to the kidnappings of 23 democracy activists between 1997 and 1998. Of those kidnapped, one person was murdered while nine others were tortured, but released. An additional 13 people are officially listed as missing, but are assumed to be dead.

US imperialism, for its own interests, acknowledged these crimes. During the administrations of Clinton, Bush, and Obama, Prabowo was effectively banned from entering the United States, which refused to grant him a visa. However, after becoming defence minister under outgoing President Joko Widodo in 2019, the Trump administration allowed Prabowo to enter the US in 2020, with then-Defence Secretary Mark Esper calling Prabowo "our counterpart, in a very important relationship."

Today, the Biden administration's goal is to coax Jakarta closer to the Washington while Indonesia has attempted to balance between the US and China, its largest trading partner. Recent developments in Indonesia have indicated a shift towards strengthening ties with Washington. This is why Washington is covering up Prabowo's crimes.

Current President Widodo held talks with Biden last November in San Francisco California, where the two leaders agreed to elevate their ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the highest level of diplomatic cooperation. Major joint military exercises with the US,

known as Super Garuda Shield, have also been expanded in the past two years and involve US allies vital to Washington's war planning, including Britain, Japan, and Australia.

Moreover, Jakarta and Washington are in discussion over a potential minerals partnership to facilitate the nickel trade. The US market is eager to gain access to Indonesia's nickel mining and refining industry, which has been largely dependent on Chinese investment. Indonesia holds the world's largest reserves of nickel, a key component of electric vehicle batteries.

Prabowo is expected to continue the current government's economic policies, including the expansion of military spending. Prabowo had the outgoing president's unofficial endorsement during the campaign with Widodo's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, running with Prabowo for vice president.

Other allies in Washington's anti-China alliance are also moving to strengthen their relationships with Jakarta. Last month, Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles visited Prabowo for high-level talks aimed at elevating the countries' military ties. The two reportedly agreed to sign a "very significant" defence cooperation agreement in the coming months, though no details have been provided.

Marles described the pact as "the single deepest and most significant defence cooperation agreement" in the history of the two countries. "Australia and Indonesia have a shared destiny and a shared collective security and that is the basis on which we are moving forward with our own defence planning," he said in a press conference.

As they carry out war preparations against China in the Indo-Pacific, US imperialism and its allies see the whitewashing of Prabowo's crimes as a critical necessity. For the working class in Indonesia and throughout the region, this should be taken as a serious warning. The bloody tactics Prabowo used throughout his career will be used against workers who come into opposition with the capitalist system and the war drive rapidly unfolding.



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