

# Indonesian government's austerity measures provoke student protests

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The Indonesian government of President Prabowo Subianto has begun to implement major budget cuts targeting education, health, infrastructure and the public service. These severe austerity measures have sparked an ongoing student protest movement across the archipelago.

Announced in January, the cost-cutting drive initially totalled \$19 billion in cuts, ostensibly to “free up funds” to pay for Prabowo’s free meal program. The program, set to cost \$28 billion annually, is aimed at providing free daily meals to 83 million schoolchildren and pregnant mothers. This populist measure was one of the central pillars of Prabowo’s election campaign and a factor in his victory last October, winning 59 percent of the national vote, amid rising poverty and malnutrition.

In order to pay for this election promise, Prabowo has taken an axe to vital public services under the fraudulent pretext of combatting “inefficiency,” seeking to emulate the policies of the Trump administration in the US.

The budgets of several government ministries were slashed. The government claimed the cuts only affect federal workers’ travel, office supplies and electricity use. The cuts, however, are significant: a 70 percent reduction for public works, 52 percent for economic affairs and 40 percent for investment. The measures have also included the scrapping of numerous infrastructure projects and impacted on building maintenance.

“I continuously demand savings, efficiency,” Prabowo said. “I demand the courage to cut down non-essential items.”

In February, Prabowo escalated this drive when the targeted cuts were raised to \$44 billion, or over 15 percent of the state budget.

Undercutting Prabowo’s professed concern for schoolchildren, funding for primary and secondary education was reduced by \$480 million, while the higher education ministry’s budget was slashed by 25 percent, down to \$2.6 billion.

The attacks on education sparked outrage on social media among students and young people, concerned that the cuts

would mean rising university fees, the cancellation of scholarships and worsening teacher welfare. This led to large student demonstrations in every major city across the nation.

The protest movement has been dubbed “Dark Indonesia,” referring to the country’s social crisis and lack of prospects for youth. The name is a reference to “Golden Indonesia,” one of Prabowo’s election campaign slogans last year.

The protests, organised by the All-Indonesian Students’ Union, were led by university student councils and convened outside city government offices, where a list of demands was presented. Rallies were held in capital city Jakarta, Surabaya, Medan, Banda Aceh, Makassar and Samarinda, among dozens of other cities.

The largest demonstration, outside the Jakarta presidential palace on February 20, drew thousands of students. Protesters brandished signs reading “RIP education,” “education emergency in Indonesia” and “the government consists of dumb people.” Protests continue to be organised, but numbers are smaller than at those in late February.

In West Papua, high school students called for free education and an upgrade to school facilities instead of free meals. They also condemned the program’s use of soldiers in distributing the free meals and growing militarisation within their schools.

Some protests escalated into near clashes with the police. In Jakarta, police used tear gas and water cannon to disperse the crowds, according to the *Jakarta Post*. In Surabaya, authorities reportedly used water cannon and arrested five students.

While opposing the austerity measures, students also raised broader economic and social issues: the rising cost of living, skyrocketing food and fuel prices, lack of subsidised cooking gas and growing social inequality. In that sense, the protests, although populated by students, reflected far wider anger over declining living standards.

The students’ list of demands included a reassessment of the budget cuts and the free meal program, as well as “free, scientific and democratic education” and an end to state corruption and the military’s dominant role in the

government. The protests called for the implementation of “pro-people policies” to protect education, health and social welfare.

Cleorisa, 20, a protester studying at Jakarta’s National University, told the *Financial Times* the free meals program is “not effective because it sacrifices education... What the public needs is education and healthcare... we need proper education to get proper jobs.”

Protest leader Herianto told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation: “The free meals aren’t, as promised, being delivered in all areas of the country, so millions of children aren’t even receiving them... Our demands reflect how dark the social-economic situation in Indonesia is, and how hard life in Indonesia is for young people.”

The dire conditions for Indonesian youth have prompted the social media hashtag #KaburAjaDulu (“Just Leave First”), which has been circulated widely during the protests and promotes the idea of leaving the country to seek job opportunities abroad.

Unemployment in Indonesia is dominated by Generation Z, or those aged 15-24, which makes up 16 percent of the country’s increasingly young population. According to the latest official data, the unemployment rate in this age cohort was 17.3 percent last August, far higher than the national rate of 4.9 percent, and particularly high among university graduates and those with vocational college diplomas.

While it is understandable that some students may want to flee Indonesia to escape these problems, it is certainly not a solution for many students who do not have the financial means to do so. Nor is it a solution for the Indonesian working class and rural poor, who live under increasingly impoverished conditions and are bearing the brunt of the government’s pro-business austerity policies.

In response to the protests and #KaburAjaDulu, several government ministers denounced students. Deputy manpower minister Immanuel Ebenezer said, “If they want to run away, just run. Do not return, if necessary.”

Prabowo remained silent for a week after the protests began. Then, on February 25, he publicly slammed the protesters and the idea of a “dark” future, citing predictions by investment firm Goldman Sachs from three years ago that Indonesia would be the world’s fourth-largest economy by 2050.

Since coming into office, Prabowo has claimed he will boost Indonesia’s annual growth to 8 percent, up from around 5 percent currently. However, Bank Indonesia cut its 2025 growth forecast in January down to a potential 4.7 percent, pointing to a weaker economic outlook and sluggish domestic consumption.

The government recently revealed that nearly half of the funds from budget cuts, \$20 billion, will be diverted to a

newly launched sovereign wealth fund, called Danantara. Prabowo has said this will help reach the 8 percent growth target, and will be used to invest in lucrative projects such as food estates, renewables and the nickel industry. In other words, he has effectively taken personal control of a significant portion of the country’s assets.

Prabowo’s austerity cuts are being undertaken amid heightened global economic instability, fuelled by the Trump administration’s trade war measures, aimed in particular at China. The Indonesian ruling class, as with its global counterparts, is seeking to escalate austerity and attack the living standards of the working class.

This is the agenda Prabowo has been tasked with enacting, on behalf of the financial elite he represents. He has been promoted by the Indonesian political establishment as the right person to suppress social tensions amid rising economic turmoil.

It should be remembered that Prabowo himself, a former general in the Suharto military dictatorship, was responsible for torturing and “disappearing” 22 student protest leaders in the 1998 mass protests against the Suharto regime, which collapsed amid the Asian economic crisis. That is just one element of his blood-soaked record as an operative for the military junta, personally responsible for countless atrocities. Today, he will not hesitate to use state repression as opposition towards his policies mounts.

That such a monstrous figure has returned to power is a total refutation of the notion of *reformasi*—that Indonesia would undergo a democratic transformation after the fall of Suharto. All the “democratic” political parties of the Indonesian ruling elite, including the PDIP, helped to rehabilitate and whitewash Prabowo as a legitimate politician.

Students and young people who want to fight Prabowo’s dictatorial policies cannot put any faith in making futile appeals to the various capitalist parties, nor will leaving the country solve anything.

Instead, they should turn towards the task of mobilising the broad mass of the working class and rural masses of Indonesia in an independent movement, against the government and its austerity drive. Such a movement needs to be based on a socialist perspective, aimed at taking political power and expropriating the vast wealth of the corporate elite to meet the needs of society.



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