

A week of protests in Indonesia fuelled by glaring social inequality

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Protests continued yesterday in many cities across Indonesia after a 21-year-old man, Affan Kurniawan, died from being hit by an armoured police vehicle as police aggressively tried to break up a rally in Jakarta on Thursday. Kurniawan was one of the many motorcycle ride-sharing drivers in Indonesia who eke out a living ferrying passengers.

The demonstrations initially erupted on Monday, after it was announced that parliamentarians would be given an exorbitant monthly accommodation allowance of 50 million rupiah (\$US3,045), highlighting the country's worsening social inequality. The figure is up to 20 times the monthly minimum wage of workers in poor areas of the country.

There has been a heavy police presence throughout the days of protest. More than 1,200 security personnel were deployed on Monday to secure the parliament building and fired tear gas as protesters attempted to approach. The police blocked off streets leading to the parliamentary compound, including several toll roads.

Angry ride-sharing drivers, students and many others gathered outside the parliament building and police headquarters in Jakarta on Friday chanting, "Killer! Killer!" amid desperate attempts by President Prabowo Subianto to appeal for calm. Seven police involved in the incident have been detained. At the same time, the government deployed troops from the navy marine corps to contain the protests.

According to the limited press reports, thousands have been involved in the protests in Jakarta and at least 600 have been arrested. Other protests were held in major cities, including Surabaya, Bandung, Yogyakarta and Solo in Java, Medan in northern Sumatra and Gorontalo in Sulawesi.

The protests have been fuelled by a groundswell of resentment and anger, particularly among young

people, over deteriorating living conditions, glaring social inequality and anti-democratic methods. But the immediate spark for this week's protests was the accommodation allowance for parliamentarians.

The government's rationale for the benefit was the decommissioning of the housing complex that provided free accommodation to parliamentarians. However, the monthly allowance of 50 million rupiah is out of all proportion to housing costs, even in expensive central Jakarta, and represents an astronomical sum for most workers. It comes on top of hefty salaries, other allowances and benefits for the 580 members of the House of Representatives.

By contrast, managers in Jakarta, on average, receive monthly salaries of less than 15 million rupiah. The minimum monthly wage for workers in Jakarta is just 5.4 million rupiah and is as low as 2.1 million rupiah in other parts of the country. Moreover, nearly 60 percent of the workforce is in the so-called informal sector, consigned to insecure jobs, and often receive less than the minimum wage.

Young people have been particularly hard hit by worsening economic conditions, which will deteriorate further under the impact of the Trump administration's tariffs of 19 percent on Indonesian goods. While the overall official unemployment rate is 5 percent, the rate for youth is 16 percent. Moreover, the official statistics are widely regarded as an underestimate.

The parliamentary accommodation allowance announcement immediately set off a wave of outraged and derisory commentary on social media, as well as calls for protests. One of the slogans has been for the dissolution of the House of Representatives. The Indonesian Trade Union Confederation (KSPI) joined the protests, demanding protections from mass layoffs and outsourcing, but made no suggestion of strike

action.

The wider sentiments among young people were echoed by comedian Aci Resti, who attended a protest at parliament against the housing allowance. “I’m here to voice the opinions of my friends, who are fed up with everything, with the members of the House of Representatives, with everything, with the government,” she said, in comments cited by Reuters.

This week’s protests are the latest this year in expressions of opposition and unrest. In February, students held a nationwide campaign of demonstrations called “Indonesia Gelap,” or Dark Indonesia. They protested against the deep austerity measures implemented by the Prabowo administration to pay for his election pledges, which included a nationwide free school lunch program and more affordable housing.

Prabowo has slashed billions of dollars in government funding for public health, education and works. Thousands of government contractors were sacked. By February, the total cutbacks were raised to \$44 billion or more than 15 percent of the state budget. While providing free school lunches, funding for primary and secondary education was reduced by \$480 million and the higher education budget was slashed by 25 percent or \$2.6 billion.

In March, student demonstrations took place against legislation to strengthen the role of the military in government. The parliament voted unanimously for amendments to the armed forces law to expand the number of institutions in which serving officers could serve, including the Attorney General’s Office, National Counterterrorism Agency, National Agency for Border Management and National Disaster Mitigation Agency.

Hundreds of student activists camped outside parliament the night before that bill was passed. The crowd swelled to a thousand the following day, with banners reading “Against militarism and oligarchy!” and “The New Order [the name of the Suharto dictatorship] strikes back!” Prabowo, who was military dictator General Suharto’s son-in-law and a top military officer, is notorious for his brutal repression of opposition to the regime.

Earlier this month, an unusual but widespread form of opposition emerged after Prabowo in late July called on citizens to “raise the red and white flag wherever you are” in the lead up to Indonesia’s Independence Day on

August 17. Instead of the national flag, the flag of the Straw Hat Pirates from the manga comic *One Piece* began to emerge in houses, streets and on vehicles as a symbol of rebellion and resistance to the government.

“Even though this country is officially independent, many of us have not truly experienced that freedom in our daily lives,” Ali Maulana, a resident of Jayapura in Indonesia, told the BBC. The *One Piece* story reflected the injustice and inequality that Indonesians experience, he said.

Prabowo is clearly concerned about the days of protest this week, despite the extensive police mobilisation, and the far broader sentiment that they reflect. As well as appealing for calm, the president expressed condolences for Kurniawan’s death and declared that he was “shocked and disappointed by the excessive actions of the officers.” He called for a thorough investigation.

No one should take these hypocritical comments at face value. Prabowo, who was responsible for torture, murder and other atrocities under the Suharto dictatorship, will not hesitate to use every means available to suppress any movement against his government. The deployment of the military and special operations police this week is a warning that his false sympathy can quickly give way to repression.

In comments cited by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Indonesian Legal Aid Foundation (YLBHI) researcher Arif Maulana said that what happened at the Thursday protest reminded him of the New Order Era, “where critical people who open their mouths are seen as enemies” and “people giving their voice [are] dubbed as criminals, being tortured, and being arrested arbitrarily.”



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