

Indonesian protests—a sign of social crisis and deep-seated opposition

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In the wake of a huge police crackdown and thousands of arrests, the protest movement that erupted in Indonesia late last month has largely subsided, but none of the basic issues that fuelled the widespread demonstrations have been resolved.

The immediate trigger for the protests was the decision to pay a huge monthly accommodation allowance of 50 million rupiah (\$US3,045) to the 580 parliamentarians of the House of Representatives (DPR)—10 to 20 times the minimum wage paid to millions of workers struggling to survive.

The lavish allowance was emblematic of far deeper concerns and opposition stemming from the immense social gulf between the country's wealthy few and their political representatives and the vast majority of working people. Moreover, the social crisis facing broad layers of the population, particularly young people, is only worsening as economic growth slows and unemployment rises. The jobless rate for youth has hit 16 percent, forcing many into poorly paid, casual work.

The protests dramatically escalated after the callous killing of a young ride-share motorbike rider Affan Kurniawan on August 28. He was run over by an armoured police vehicle amid a mass mobilisation of police, including the notorious, heavily-armed BRIMOB. In the following days, angry protesters clashed with police, attacked government buildings and stormed the homes of prominent political figures including Finance Minister Sri Mulyani, the architect of the budget cuts that set off protests earlier in the year.

Facing a deepening political crisis, President Prabowo Subianto delayed a planned trip to China. He appeared at a press conference on August 31, flanked by leaders of the main political parties, to appeal for calm, declaring he understood “the genuine aspirations

of the public.” At the same time, however, he ordered “the police and military to take the strongest possible action” against purported looting and destruction.

The protests involving thousands were not limited to the capital Jakarta but had spread to major cities throughout the country, including Surabaya, Surakarta, Bandung, Semarang and Yogyakarta in Java; Banda Aceh, Padang and Medan in Sumatra; as well as Makassar and Kendari in Sulawesi, Palangka Raya in Kalimantan, and Manokwari in West Papua.

At least 11 people died in the clashes with the police and military, hundreds were injured, and another 20 protesters are missing, according to the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence. More than 3,000 people have been arrested.

Confronting a police crackdown, the protests subsided last week but the anger has not. Smaller protests continued. Last Wednesday, hundreds of women from the Indonesian Women's Alliance (IWA) marched to the parliament building in Jakarta wielding brooms to “sweep away the dirt of the state, militarism and police repression.”

Last Thursday, a student demonstration led by the All-Indonesian Students' Union (BEM SI) took place outside the parliament, where its central coordinator Muzammil Ihsan read out a list of demands, including the reduction of parliamentary allowances, complete reform of the national police and parliament, the release of all those arrested and the creation of 19 million jobs.

On the same day, members of the Labor Movement with the People (GEBRAK) held a protest in a major road in Jakarta also demanding the complete reform of the police and parliament.

On Thursday evening, a delegation of student leaders was invited to meet ministers at the Presidential Palace but reportedly walked out of the talks after being told

they had to consider “the nation’s development” in making any demands.

Last week, a grouping of activist organisations drew up a list of 17 short-term “people’s demands” to be implemented by Prabowo and the government by last Friday along with eight longer-term ones. The deadline, however, passed with few of the demands being met or partially met.

In a bid to quell widespread anger, the parliament did announce the axing of the housing allowance that initially sparked the protests. The announcement was left to the parliamentary speaker Puan Maharani. She is the daughter of former president Megawati Sukarnoputri, chairperson of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P)—the only parliamentary party that is not part of the Prabowo government.

On the same day, Co-ordinating Minister for Economic Affairs Airlangga Hartarto suggested that the government would carry out various stimulus measures to boost jobs and incomes—including wage subsidies for those earning less than 10 million rupiah a month, a program of public works, tax exemptions and steps to prevent mass lay-offs. But under conditions of a slowing economy that will be further hit by Trump’s tariffs, these proposals have the character of empty promises.

No steps have been taken to rein in the police and military. The only action taken against the police has been against low-level officers involved in the widely publicised killing of ride-share worker Affan Kurniawan. The officer in charge of the vehicle that struck Kurniawan has been dishonourably dismissed, and another received a seven-year demotion.

These measures are unlikely to assuage popular anger and resentment. Imran, a food delivery driver, told *Al Jazeera* that “inequality” was the root cause of the mass protests, “including economic inequality, educational inequality, health inequality and unequal public services.”

Referring to the government and parliament, he said: “They are not concerned about our fate. They should be present to resolve the problems facing the community, not fan the flames. These protests arose from the community’s poor economic conditions.”

Speaking to *Al Jazeera*, Rahmawati, a housewife, said that public anger had “finally exploded ...because

we feel like no one cares about us... What we want is for them [politicians] to care about us and our needs. Every year, the price of basic foodstuffs rises and never goes back down again. Groceries are becoming more and more difficult to afford.”

Significantly, the protests in Indonesia reverberated more broadly throughout South East Asia as workers and young people confront very similar economic and social problems, exacerbated by slowing economies. Protests took place last week in support of those in Indonesia, including in Malaysia and Thailand.

Thai students hung a banner on an overpass near Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok declaring “Thailand stands with the people of Indonesia” and called for justice for those protesters killed during police crackdowns.

In Thailand, a social media poster called Yammi shared instructions on how to order meals for Jakarta-based ride-share and food delivery motorbike riders. Revealing sympathy not just with the protesters but the difficult and dangerous conditions facing poorly paid riders, the post went viral in the region and internationally. Donations came in from Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei, as well as Japan, Sweden and the United States.

The protests have provided a glimpse of the explosive social tensions that have built up in Indonesia as well as the broader region and will only intensify amid growing global economic turmoil.



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