

# Indonesian government promotes phony police reform following protests

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14 October 2025

In the aftermath of the two-week long protests in Indonesia that began at the end of August, the government of President Prabowo Subianto is pursuing so-called “police reform” and other measures meant to give the impression that it is responding to issues that led to the demonstrations.

This week, Prabowo is planning to inaugurate a nine-member committee dubbed the National Police Reform Committee. The specific issues the committee will address have not been made clear, but discussions by figures close to the government have raised the need to change the “culture” within the Indonesian National Police (Polri).

The focus on reform follows the violent response of the police as well as the use of the military to suppress the recent protests. Affan Kurniawan, a twenty-one-year-old motorcycle taxi driver and delivery worker, was killed after being rammed by a police armored vehicle on August 28, stoking widespread anger and fueling additional protests. At least ten people were killed in total.

However, the demonstrations began over widespread inequality in Indonesia after it was announced that members of parliament would receive an exorbitant 50-million-rupiah (\$US3,000) housing allowance in addition to other benefits. This alone was more than 20 times higher than the minimum wage in some parts of Indonesia.

At present, the identities of the president’s reform committee members, save one, have not been released, although it is expected to include former national police chiefs. State Secretary Minister Prasetyo Hadi said on October 8, “They are figures who possess legal expertise as well as those who have professional competence and experience in the police sector.”

The only member that has been revealed is Mahfud MD, the coordinating minister for political, legal and security affairs under the previous government of Joko Widodo.

He also previously served as the chief justice of the Constitutional Court and as defense minister. The inclusion of Mahfud, a well-known advocate of purported legal reform who has made criticisms of the Prabowo government, and the announcement of his participation, are no doubt meant to give the committee some credibility.

A second committee has also been formed. Chief of Police Listyo Sigit Prabowo established the Police Reform Transition Team on September 17, composed of 52 leading police officials to develop plans that would supposedly reform the Polri. The two committees are expected to work together.

Neither of these committees has any intention of carrying out genuine reforms. Any measures enacted by the ruling class will be to strengthen state power, not limit it. Furthermore, the issue of reforms within the police is not new, but has been discussed since the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 as part of the so-called *reformasi* era. While some measures were taken, such as splitting the police from the military, the police remain a violent and oppressive component of capitalist rule.

Police reform emerged as one of the “17+8 Demands” put together by student groups and labor unions involved in leading the protests. The name refers to seventeen short-term demands and eight long-term ones. They included an end to police brutality and a commitment from the armed forces not to declare martial law in the event of demonstrations. Others included an end to mass layoffs, tax reform and government dialogue with labor unions.

Any of the demands that the Prabowo government implements will be entirely for show. At the same time, the student groups and unions that have organized the demands did so with the aim of shutting down the protests, not expanding opposition to the government. They have explicitly avoided the fact that it is capitalism that is responsible for the conditions workers and students

face.

On September 3, student leaders from groups that included Muzammil Ihsan of All-Indonesian Students' Union (BEM SI) and Abdul Haki of the Muslim Students' Association (HMI) met with members of parliament. More than 30 representatives of related organizations met with the Minister of Higher Education, Science, and Technology Brian Yuliarto the following day at the presidential palace.

Organizations like BEM SI do not represent the interests of working-class youth, but rather those of middle and upper-middle-class layers. BEM SI maintains connections with the police and the government and participation in the organization is seen as a stepping stone to political positions.

Similarly, while various labor unions took part in the August protests, they put forward no calls for strikes to oppose government repression. The Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI), one of the largest in the country, is led by Said Iqbal, who also leads the phony "left-wing" Labour Party.

Said is not a working-class leader, but a right-wing, seasoned political operative. He was formerly an activist with the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party. He has backed Prabowo and expressed his "firm" support for the president following the protests.

Therefore, the focus on supposedly addressing police violence serves multiple purposes. First, Prabowo's government can claim to be enacting the demands of the demonstrators while doing nothing to address rising inequality. The student and labor leaders can in turn promote their own roles in supposedly driving change while in actuality keeping a lid on social discontent for the time being.

What is being kept from the working class and youth is that whatever measures are ultimately enacted will be used to strengthen Prabowo's grip on power and almost certainly expand the influence of the military.

Before turning to politics, Prabowo spent his career in the Indonesian special forces known as Kopassus, which he led from 1995 to 1998. A United States-trained killer and trusted hand of Suharto, Prabowo has been implicated in numerous atrocities in East Timor, West Papua and Aceh Province, as well as orchestrating the kidnapping and murder of activists as Suharto's New Order regime was coming to an end.

The Indonesian bourgeoisie elevated Prabowo to power not despite this record, but because of it. Poverty, inequality, and low wages are widespread throughout the

country. Even before Trump's return to office in the US and the imposition of a 19 percent tariff rate on Indonesian exports to America, the economy was in decline. Significant protests against an Omnibus Law attacking workers' conditions broke out in 2020.

Since his election last October, Prabowo has centralized power in his hands and elevated the military's role. "One of the clearest features of Prabowo's presidency is his effort to reorganize Indonesia through [the] centralization of power," Made Supriatma, a visiting fellow at Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, told the *Financial Times* in September.

Using the protests as a pretext, Prabowo on September 17 replaced the Coordinating Minister for Politics and Security Budi Gunawan with former general Djamari Chaniago, in a position that has authority over both the military and police. Djamari served as chief of the general staff of the military from 2000 to 2004. Prabowo is placing a trusted official in the position in order to solidify his grip on the armed forces. The president is also particularly close to Defense Minister Sjafrie Sjamsoeddin.

Prabowo is also carrying out a massive restructuring of the military. This includes creating one hundred so-called territorial development battalions, with plans to deploy them to every district of the country within five years. These battalions will be used in fields such as agriculture, infrastructure and healthcare.

In March, Prabowo oversaw the passage of a law that allows a larger number of military officers to hold civilian positions in government. The government is increasingly returning to the policy of *dwifungsi*, or dual function, in which the armed forces played both military and civilian roles during the Suharto dictatorship, a key component of his rule.

All of these changes, whether to the police, military, or government, are being carried out in preparation for suppressing working-class opposition to capitalism in Indonesia.



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