

Boarding school collapse in Indonesia kills 67

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16 October 2025

On September 29, a school building in East Java, Indonesia collapsed with students inside, resulting in the death of at least 67 people and more than 100 injuries. The circumstances around the accident point to serious lapses in basic safety measures.

The collapse took place at the Al Khoziny Islamic boarding school, located in Sidoarjo, East Java. The Indonesian National Agency for Disaster Countermeasure stated that this was the single deadliest disaster in the country for 2025.

At the time of the collapse, additional levels were being added to the two-storey school even while students were praying inside. This involved trucks adding additional concrete. Muhammad Rijalul Qoib, a 13-year-old student who witnessed the incident, stated that one truck “poured the very top part all at once” with the heavy load being placed on the school very quickly.

Surviving students reported feeling the building shake slightly before the collapse, but this warning sign was ignored and the students were not evacuated nor was construction halted. Since they were in a large open area for prayer, the building collapsed in a manner in which the layers of concrete stacked upon each other and left almost no spaces in which people might have survived. This also made it harder for rescuers to navigate the destruction.

The Indonesian National Rescue Agency attempted to recover as many of the trapped students as possible, initially refraining from using heavy excavation tools for fear of setting off a secondary collapse and causing further harm to the those trapped under the rubble. In addition to those killed, 104 were rescued from the debris.

These types of schools, known as *pesantren*, operate with very little government oversight. They are generally funded by fees from students and possibly a small amount of government funding. Through a lack

of funds and cost-cutting measures, *pesantrens* often require students to assist in construction work, often as punishment. Students and parents confirmed that this was the case at Al Khoziny after the school’s collapse. An engineering expert told BBC Indonesia that the construction was unplanned and did not comply with existing regulations.

According to Minister for Public Works Dody Hanggodo, out of a total 42,391 *pesantren* in Indonesia, only 51 this year have the correct permits and other paperwork for construction. This includes a “building permit agreement” that allows construction to begin and a “functionally sound certificate” that the government issues after inspecting a building upon its completion.

Dody attempted to deflect blame for these common and dangerous practices, by claiming *pesantrens* are “run by students, for students” and that their operators “assume they do not need permits.”

However, in rural areas, construction work not just on *pesantrens* but more broadly is often conducted without permits. In an archipelago prone to earthquakes, oversight on construction, based on modern safety standards, is vital. Yet the ruling class in Indonesia as well as other countries regularly demonstrates its contempt for such basic measures due to the impact on profits.

Cost-cutting measures in construction across Indonesia have resulted in several other collapses, of which the Al Khoziny school has been a particularly deadly example. In the last fifteen years there have been at least seven other significant collapses in Indonesia, such as that of the Kutai Kartanegara Bridge in 2011, which was linked to a lack of maintenance and the poor quality of construction materials. At least 20 people were killed, 40 injured, and another 19 reported missing.

Though *pesantrens* are mostly private institutions,

many attempt to access government funds, particularly from the Ministry of Religious Affairs. At least seven to ten million students attend *pesantrens* throughout Indonesia, with many coming from poor, rural families.

The problem of underfunding education and infrastructure is long-running and has only worsened in the last year under the presidency of Prabowo Subianto. At the beginning of 2025, the government announced cuts to the budgets for education, infrastructure, and healthcare, amounting to approximately \$US19 billion, or 8.5 percent of the state budget. This money was diverted into a new sovereign wealth fund known as Danantara, through which Prabowo effectively seized control of a large portion of Indonesia's assets.

Beginning in February, these cuts provoked anger in the Indonesian population. A student protest movement, named the "Dark Indonesia" protests, was launched, denouncing the government's attacks on education and other social services. Furthermore, young people aged 15 to 24 face widespread unemployment, with an official unemployment rate of at least 16 percent, about three times higher than the overall unemployment rate.

A major justification given for the severe reductions to the budgets, was the funding of Prabowo's "free meal" program for students and pregnant women to supposedly combat malnutrition. The program was a populist pledge Prabowo made during his election campaign. However, the quality of the food has been called into question as thousands of youth have contracted food poisoning from these meals.

In addition, Prabowo has used the program to expand the role of the military in society, deploying troops to schools and other locations to play a role in distributing meals. Under the guise of carrying out a social program, Prabowo is in fact reviving the Suharto dictatorship-era concept of *dwifungsi*, or dual function, in which the armed forces play both military and civilian roles. This was a key component of propping up Suharto's New Order regime.

Prabowo intends to create one hundred so-called territorial development battalions in the military, 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.

This expansion of the military is being carried out to prepare for the suppression of unrest under

deteriorating social conditions and growing social inequality. In addition to the February protests, widespread demonstrations also took place in August and September.

These protests began over the announcement of a massive 50-million-rupiah (\$US3,000) housing allowance to be paid to members of parliament, ten times the amount of the minimum wage in Jakarta. They were further inflamed when a delivery driver, Affan Kurniawan, was killed by an armored police vehicle during the demonstrations.

Ultimately, the underlying cause of the Al Khoziny school collapse, other similar disasters, and the overall decline in social conditions is not unscrupulous or indifferent individuals, but the capitalist system itself that places profit over the lives of the working class.



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