

Indonesian protests point to old patterns

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The last week has seen a wave of huge protests around Indonesia against the new so-called omnibus law—a massive law that amends 79 existing statutes and is touted by the government as easing investment and facilitating job creation, but which critics say strips rights from workers and makes it easier for companies to violate environmental standards. The passage of the law prompted violent clashes around the country. According to the Legal Aid Institute, police used violence against demonstrators in at least [18 provinces](#); by 7 October police were reporting they had arrested [more than 1,000 people](#) in Jakarta and surrounding regions alone. Alongside labour groups and various other activist coalitions, the leading force in the protests has been students.

This wave of protest comes about a year after a similar outpouring of unrest when students and others protested against attempts to amend or introduce various laws—most of which changes were later rolled into the omnibus law—and against the gutting of Indonesia’s Corruption Eradication Commission. These two sets of protests are important signs of resistance to the slow-motion decline of Indonesian democracy that has accelerated during the presidency of Joko Widodo.

The prominence of students in both waves of protest is noteworthy, and deserves attention in its own right.

The return of student protest on such a scale marks the dramatic resumption of an important Indonesian political tradition. For much of the past two decades, students have not been a particularly important political force, at least not in their own right. To be sure, from time to time students have mobilised in large numbers—such as during protests against the removal of fuel subsidies under the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. But these protests did little to set the national political agenda.

And students have until recently largely failed to act cohesively *as students*. Instead, students have tended to pursue diverse interests and affiliations, joining or supporting the various political parties, social movements and activist groups that populate Indonesia’s democratic political landscape. The very idea of a cohesive and distinctive student movement seemed to be slowly fading.

It was not always like this. Student protest played a key role in regime change during two periods of political transition in Indonesia: the 1965-66 downfall of President Sukarno’s Guided Democracy, and the collapse of President Suharto’s New Order regime in 1998. During the three decades of authoritarianism under Suharto, students were repeatedly at the forefront of anti-government opposition, pioneering new forms of political action, and often being at the receiving end of repression as a result.

When the Asian financial crisis hit Indonesia in 1997-98, students not only led the *Reformasi* protests that ultimately ended Suharto’s rule. They also played a key role in transforming the inchoate anger of the streets into a rough political program that demanded not only Suharto’s resignation but also the abolition of the military’s political role, the repeal of repressive political

laws, and a transition to full democracy.

Why students?

So why are the students so prominent in protest once again?

One reason is organisational. One legacy of the *Reformasi* period is that students now find it much easier to mobilise. During the Suharto regime, the government put in place numerous political restrictions on campuses, as in other spheres of Indonesian life. In particular, representative student councils were controlled under so-called Normalisation of Campus Life (Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus, NKK) policies introduced in the late 1970s. The result was that, by the 1980s and 1990s, anti-government student action was mostly expressed through an array of informal and subterranean discussion clubs, activist groups and coalitions (for one analysis from that time, click [here](#)).

Now Student Executive Bodies (Badan Eksekutif Mahasiswa, BEM) are freely elected bodies in each faculty and campus and they can coordinate student actions with a strong claim to representative legitimacy. Once a sufficient number of students and their elected leaders get mobilised around a set of issues—as they have in 2019 and 2020—it is now relatively easy for them to organise on a national scale. One sign of this is the prominence of BEM in many of the latest wave of protests, as is the leading role played of the national coalition of these bodies, the BEM SI (All-Indonesia Student Executive Bodies – see its Facebook page [here](#)).

Another obvious reason for the return of student mobilisation is the history alluded to above: the story of Indonesian student activism provides a compelling narrative and source of inspiration for today's generation. Unlike in most countries, university students in Indonesia are socialised into a political world in which they know that their forebears have repeatedly played a critical role in shaping the course of national events.

More specifically, today's students have grown up in an Indonesia where democracy is itself a tangible legacy of the *Reformasi* protests pioneered by students in 1998-99. One of the galvanising slogans of the protests last year and now is *Reformasi dikorupsi*—*Reformasi* corrupted—suggesting that the historic achievements of Indonesian reform—and Indonesian students—are now being traduced by a self-serving and corrupt governing elite.

Viewed in a broader perspective, student protest is often a feature of polities in which civilian political competition is poorly institutionalised. Where varied political parties and social movements compete in the public sphere, the tendency is for university students to go their separate ways and affiliate to whichever groups express their individual interests. As a result, [cohesive student movements tend to fade](#) as democracies consolidate and civilian politics becomes entrenched. As noted above, this seemed to be the trend during the first decade or so of Indonesian democracy.

The return of student protest can itself thus be seen as yet one more sign that Indonesia's democracy is going awry. That a new generation of students feels compelled to save the achievements of an earlier generation suggests that such aspirations are not being expressed through more institutionalised political channels—notably, through political parties. Instead, the protestors allege, the parties are colluding with Indonesia's oligarchs not only to push through the pro-business provisions of the omnibus law, but to degrade the quality of Indonesia's democracy overall.

A familiar script

The return of the students is not the only echo of the past in the current protests. So is the

government response.

I used to research student activism back in the late New Order period, so these echoes ring particularly loudly for me. But any long-time observer of Indonesian politics cannot help but be struck by the drift back toward New Order patterns of political management in the response to these protests.

This drift is, of course, most obvious in the general recourse to repressive measures, and in the increasingly politicised role of the security apparatus. This topic warrants lengthy analysis in its own right, for now one example can suffice: the national police in response to the protests circulated a telegram to officers ordering them to take various actions, one of which was: "Generate narratives to counter issues which discredit the government." Such an approach is an obvious violation of political neutrality, one of the key pillars of security sector reform in the years following the downfall of Suharto.

At the same time, Indonesian media have also reported that security officials have been adopting various informal approaches to dealing with protests. For example, they have been [making quiet visits to protest organisers to "dissuade" them from taking action.](#) On campuses, there have been many signs that government officials are pressuring university authorities to constrain dissent and rein in their unruly students.

Some of the old techniques have not yet been revived: in the past, for example, leading student activists were often tried for subversion. But the parallels with the indirect methods the New Order regime used to deal with opposition are very clear.

Equally striking has been the government's discursive response. Many government leaders have responded to protestors not by addressing directly their concerns, but instead by focusing on the alleged presence of shadowy forces manipulating them. When doing so, officials use language that is more than merely reminiscent of the language used by leaders of the New Order- it is a virtual carbon copy.

For example, as quoted by numerous Indonesian news sites, the Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, Airlangga Hartarto, said "Actually, the government knows who is behind the demonstrations. We know who is mobilising them. We know who the sponsors are, we know who is paying for them." The powerful Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment (and former general) Luhut Binsar Panjaitan made similar remarks, alleging that the protests are being *ditunggangi* (ridden—as when someone rides a horse) by ambitious political figures whom he declined to name. The State Intelligence Agency (BIN) has stated it knows the names of the *dalang* (the puppet master in Javanese shadow theatre) of the demonstrations. The police, in turn, have pinned the blame on members of so-called anarchist groups (*kelompok anarko*), claiming to have arrested [796 such individuals](#) across seven provinces by 9 October.

Such language is virtually identical to New Order discourse. Back in the 1980s or 1990s, whenever students or other groups organised protests, it was standard response for security officers to accuse the protestors of being *ditunggangi* and to point to mysterious *dalang* manipulating them for personal gain. Sometimes, the implicit accusation was that the *dalang* was the banned Indonesian Communist Party or other leftist groups (in the final two years of the New Order, the leftist People's Democratic Party (*Partai Rakyat Demokratik*, PRD) was the regime's preferred scapegoat). More often than not officials would not name the alleged *dalang*. The vagueness of the accusation added to its menace.

The same script is being played out today. There is a contemporary twist insofar that the

government, including the president himself, is placing much of the blame for the protests on hoaxes and disinformation spread on social media. But the effects are similar. As in the past, one effect is to suggest that protestors are dupes, who don't fully understand the issues at stake. The wider effect of the accusations of manipulation—now as in the past—is to deprive protestors of agency and deny the legitimacy of their grievances.

Back to the future

For years, scholars of Indonesian politics have stressed that we should not conflate current trends of democratic regression with a drift back toward a revived version of New Order rule. It would not be easy to restore New Order-style authoritarianism. That system was built around a relatively narrow core, consisting of the military and a group of civilian allies. The base of the current regime is much broader, with a wide range of political parties represented in government, each with networks reaching up into Indonesia's wealthy elite and down into society through a myriad of formal and informal linkages. In parallel with this, the scope of repression used against civilian forces today is targeted far more narrowly than it was in the past. Recompressing the governing coalition to New Order dimensions would not be easy.

But analysts also need to point out when New Order techniques of governance are making even a partial comeback. Indonesia's [reformasi never represented a complete break with its authoritarian past](#). Senior government ministers—including Airlangga and Luhut—have direct links back to that old regime. In the government's response to the current wave of protest, a return of distinctive New Order patterns of political management is becoming obvious. Little wonder, then, that some of the old patterns of political dissent—including a powerful student movement—are also experiencing a revival.

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