

Capital's Repressive Apparatus: Privatised Violence Against Labour in Indonesia

Tuesday 21 March 2023, by [CHOIR Miftachul](#) (Date first published: 27 February 2023).

In Indonesia, predatory alliances of politicians and businesses were established during the 32-year New Order era under Soeharto and survived in post-reform Indonesia.

Richard Robison's *Rise of Capital* (1986) and Vedi Hadiz & Richard Robison's *Reorganizing Power* (2004) introduced the idea that wealth accumulation in Indonesia could not be separated from violence and political intervention. How have the elites reproduced wealth and power?

In his book *State of Disorder: Privatized Violence and the State in Indonesia* (2022), Abdil Mughis Mudhoffir explained that one of the mechanisms of violence used to reproduce wealth and power is the proliferation of privatised violence.

Such violence is personified by the *preman*, the Indonesian term for a member of an organised gang. Though *preman* are "institutionally distinct from formal state agencies," Mudhoffir writes, they are in fact "part of the organisation of the state that serves the interests of private capital and contending political elites."

In Indonesia, *preman* are occasionally used by the government and private sectors to forcefully evict residents, street vendors, and protesters. Labour unions are also victims of *preman*. Through interviews with labour unions in West Java and with the local *preman*, Mudhoffir uncovers how the ultimate aim of *preman* is to weaken the organising power of labour unions through intimidation, physical attacks, and propaganda.

Research on privatised violence in Indonesia is not new. Previously, Ian Wilson's *The Politics of Protection Rackets* (2015) and Edward Aspinall & Garry van Klinken's *State and Illegality* (2011) place the question of state capacity at the centre of their analysis. On the contrary, Mudhoffir encourages readers not to pay too much attention to the state's capacity but instead to examine how the existence of *preman* facilitates capital and power accumulation. In other words, the ruling class in Indonesia *needs* the proliferation of *preman*.

Contrary to previous studies, Mudhoffir's book successfully repoliticises the proliferation of privatised violence, rather than treating them as mere governmental failures. In a broader perspective, his research demonstrates how the labour movement in Indonesia not only has to face the business elites and the government, but also their informal repressive apparatuses. It makes a valuable contribution in understanding the methods and mechanisms used to dismantle the labour movement and politics in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

A History of Privatised Violence

Preman is not a new phenomenon in Indonesia. Mudhoffir investigates the historical development of capitalism in Indonesia, where violence has been inseparable from capital accumulation.

The proliferation of *preman* dates back to Dutch colonisation, which introduced a capitalist mode of production through the plantation system. Historical records on regents demonstrate how the colonial government, along with the local regents, employed violence groups called *jago*, *jawara*, *blater* to force people to lease their lands, sell their labour cheaply, and act as informers to ensure law and order at the local level. Instead of exterminating the *jago*, Dutch government benefited from their assistance for accumulating wealth and power.

During the Japanese occupation, *preman* groups were institutionalised and incorporated into the Japanese paramilitary unit such as *PETA*, *Heiho*, and *Seinedan*. *Preman* were also involved in military training, had access to weapons, and assisted the Japanese government in counterinsurgency.

After the declaration of independence in 1945, the Indonesian government implemented economic policies that failed to deliver economic prosperity. In 1959, President Soekarno decided to nationalise and appropriate foreign asset. Soekarno's closeness with the military resulted in the latter dominating the appropriated assets. Other than ties with Soekarno, military domination was also possible as there was a lack of indigenous capitalist class due to Dutch domination over resources during the colonial era.

During the nationalisation era under Soekarno's guided democracy (1955-65), *preman* group *Pemuda Pancasila* was established to challenge native resistance against military domination, especially those coming from the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI). Mudhoffir noted that the Nationalisation Bill of 1958, which brought most foreign enterprises under military supervision, signaled the beginning of the end of the labour unions' challenge of the military, as the number of labour protests gradually declined.

Finally, in 1965, PKI and its sympathisers were annihilated. Soekarno's successor, General Soeharto, employed anti-communist sentiments to consolidate his power. During his 32-year reign, *preman* were centralised under Soeharto's command with the task of destroying the social bases of the movement, discrediting potential rivals, and consolidating public support for Soeharto's Party of Functional Groups (Golkar).

The empowerment of *preman* groups is not the result of a dysfunctional state. Rather, it has been useful for the accumulation of power and wealth. State domination over resources since the colonial era led to the capitalist class in Indonesia being developed by the state and depending on its monopoly power. Indonesia is a capitalist state that prevents the interests of progressive movements, including labour, to be included in its policymaking.

The Politico-Economic Functions of Preman

Mudhoffir notices the decline in the wave of labour strikes after 2013, along with the number of recorded union members. He suggests that *preman* played an important role in the labour movement's decline.

Mudhoffir highlights the case in Bekasi, West Java, one of the biggest industrial park in Southeast Asia and the place of the biggest and most consolidated labour movement, the Indonesian Metal Workers Union Federation (FSPMI). The labour union encountered opposition from *preman* groups such as *Pemuda Pancasila*, Siliwangi Troops, Indonesia Lower Class Movement, and the Local Sons Association. Mudhoffir's interview with the leader of FSPMI revealed how businesses employed those *preman* groups to disrupt labour protests.

Mudhoffir illustrates the story of October 2012, when Samsung deployed 400 *preman* armed with

weapons to attack a labour demonstration led by FSPMI. A gang of *Preman* later destroyed the House of Labour, a place used for consolidation and education. Following the attack against FSPMI, an agreement between local government, employers, *preman*, and reluctantly labour unions was concluded, demanding the labour movement to end the demonstration and maintain industrial peace.

The agreement also permitted *preman* to counter any labour activity considered disruptive of peaceful order. Hence, it provides legitimacy for *preman* to attack labour mobilisation in Bekasi. A few months after the agreement was signed, another labour demonstration erupted and met with *Pemuda Pancasila* and other *preman* groups' attack with machetes and swords, causing 29 workers to be wounded.

It is important to highlight that *preman* groups in Bekasi camouflaged as a civil society organisation representing public interests. Some of them were established as Bekasi's People Movement and Investor Concern Society. Mudhoffir presents the discourses used by *preman* to intimidate labour unions and gain public legitimacy, as written in *preman* letters, propaganda, and banners:

"Demonstration creates riots, disturbances, and traffic congestion as well as hinders the rights of the people to work: indigenous people will act."

The violence against workers traumatised FSPMI's members and forced the labour movement to embrace political contracts with election candidates, instead of building up their mobilization capacity. Mudhoffir noted how Said Iqbal, the leader of FSPMI, declared his support to Prabowo Subianto, a former military general, in the 2014 Presidential Election. In exchange, Iqbal would be appointed to the Ministry of Manpower. Officials from FSPMI admitted that street protests were no longer possible and safe, as their justification for turning to politics.

Other union confederations, however, decided to support Joko Widodo in the same election. The shift to politics caused union members to feel betrayed by their leaders as they became trapped in transactional politics. Hence, this fragmented and weakened the labour movement.

According to Mudhoffir, the case in Bekasi indicates *preman* have been useful in the contest over power and resources. Businesspeople require *preman* to protect their business activities from the threat of labour unions and civil society movements. His respondent from *Pemuda Pancasila* admitted that local businesses in some regions needed to establish a network with *preman* figures linked to local government leaders.

Moreover, the proliferation of *preman* is particularly useful because in a democratic context, the police and military could not be used as easily as coercive instruments of the state for the purpose of union-busting and intimidating union members.

Implications

In Indonesia, the public questioned why *Pemuda Pancasila* still exists everywhere: from the parking lot in the supermarket to internet memes of their activities across the country.

Instead of explaining it as a result of a dysfunctional state, Mudhoffir argues that the rise of *preman* is inseparable from the accumulation of wealth and capital that requires extra-economic means, most notably violence. *Preman* violations targeted at labour unions illustrate that the economic elite needs violence to separate producers from their means of production.

Rather than treating *preman* as an indicator of state failure, Mudhoffir pointed out that the proliferation of *preman* means the state works properly. As capitalist development evolved in

Indonesia, the absence of indigenous capital and progressive movements meant the predatory alliance of business and political elites dominated the state of Indonesia and created a predatory democracy. To serve their interest of accumulating wealth and power, the rule of law intentionally made disorder, allowing the extra-economic means such as *preman* to flourish.

Under the state of disorder, changes from within and compromises with the political elite could not improve the situation of labour in Indonesia. The domination of the capitalist class in the government means the politicians have no interest other than accumulating power and wealth.

Miftachul Choir is an Indonesian postgraduate student at the Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies, Mahidol University, Thailand. His research interest in political sociology of human rights, anti-corruption and social movement in Southeast Asia. Miftachul's most recent research on the anti-corruption movement in Indonesia was published in the Simulacra Journal.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Asian Labour Review

<https://labourreview.org/capitals-repressive-apparatus/>