

# Indonesia: Jakarta's air position and people's right to live in a decent city

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**On Sunday August 13, based on data from the IQAir air quality monitoring website at 6 am, the Air Quality Index (AQI) in Jakarta stood at 170 or in the unhealthy category, with high levels of PM2.5 pollutants. Over the last few weeks, the IQAir website has recorded Jakarta as being the most polluted city in the world, with an air quality nine times worse than the WHO ideal quality standard.**

Reports have emerged about residents in Jakarta and its surrounds suffering respiratory illnesses. President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo was even reported to have been coughing for the last three weeks. The Jakarta Health Office said that throughout 2023 there has been a rise in residents suffering respiratory illnesses. Air pollution can cause respiratory infections, pneumonia, bronchitis, cardiovascular illnesses and cancer. Those who are most vulnerable are children who physiologically breathe faster and deeper than adults.

So what is a cause of all this? The Director General for Pollution Control and Environmental Damage at the Environment and Forestry Ministry, Sigit Reliantoro, says that the government is currently focused on efforts to control pollution in the transportation sector. This is because, according to Reliantoro, transportation is the largest contributor to air pollution at 44 percent. The industrial sector meanwhile, contributes around 31 percent.

Environment and Forestry Minister Siti Nurbaya Bakar claimed that the main cause of the air pollution is motor vehicles. Because based on their records for 2022, there are some 24.5 million motor vehicles in Jakarta, 19.2 million of which are motorcycles. She also denied that the air pollution originated from the nearby Suralaya coal-fired power plant (PLTU) in Cilegon. This is because based on an analysis of the pollution from the power plant it does not travel towards Jakarta, but North to the Sunda Strait. "So it can be said that it's not because of the PLTU, yes, moreover it can be seen from the results of a study on the utilisation of coal its influence on Jakarta is less than 1 percent", she said.

Yet, research by the Center for Research on Energy and Clean Air (CREA) published in August 2020 found that fossil fuel power plants and industrial factories were the principle polluters. The CREA noted that Jakarta is surrounded by 118 industrial facilities which also contribute to air pollution in Jakarta. These pollutants can reach Jakarta as a consequence of the wind direction at certain times.

Actually, the President of the Republic of Indonesia, the Environment Minister, the Home Affairs Minister and the Health Minister have already been found guilty by a court of violating the law in their handling of Jakarta's pollution. The defendants were declared guilty of violating articles under Law Number 32/2009 on Environmental Protection and Management.

The class action suit on air pollution in the capital was launched by 32 residents represented by the Capital City Advocacy Team (an initiative of the Universal Clean Air Coalition) in July 2019 at the

Central Jakarta District Court. The plaintiffs argued that Jakarta's polluted air had resulted in the public's right to enjoy a good and healthy environment not being fulfilled.

In 2010 there were 5 million cases of illness related to air pollution, which increase in 2016 to 6 million cases. As a consequence, the Jakarta public was burdened with a cost of 38.5 trillion rupiah in 2010 and 51.2 trillion rupiah in 2016 for the treatment of air pollution related illnesses.

The court ordered the first defendant (President Joko Widodo) to set a national ambient air quality standard that would be sufficient to protect human health, the environment and the ecosystem, including the health of sensitive sectors of the population based on scientific developments and technology.

The second defendant (Siti Nurbaya Bakar) was ordered to conduct supervision of then Jakarta Governor Anies Baswedan, Banten Governor Wahidin Halim and West Java Governor Ridwan Kamil in conducting an inventory of cross boarder emissions in Jakarta, Banten and West Java provinces.

The third defendant, Home Affairs Minister Tito Karnavian was ordered to conduct supervision and provide guidance on the performance of the fifth defendant (Baswedan) in controlling air pollution.

The fourth defendant, Health Minister Budi Gunadi Sadikin, was ordered to calculate the a decrease in the health impacts due to air pollution in Jakarta that needs to be achieved as a basis for assessing the fifth defendant (the Jakarta governor) in drafting a strategy and action plan to control pollution.

But instead of carrying out the court's ruling, in early January the President of the Republic of Indonesia and the Environment and Forestry Minister instead submitted an appeal against the ruling with the Supreme Court.

In response to the mounting public outcry over the problem, Coordinating Minister for Maritime Affairs and Investment Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan summoned two regional heads and several ministers for a coordinating meeting. In a post on his Instagram account Pandjaitan said that six measures would be taken to address the problem.

First, they would attempt weather modification by cloud seeding; second industry and power plants would be obliged to utilise scrubbers to reduce smokestack pollutants; third there would be an extension and tightening up of vehicle emission tests; fourth, working hours would be staggered; fifth, the government would promote the use of public transport by increasing capacity during working hours; and sixth, there would be an acceleration in the use of electric vehicles.

Meanwhile, acting Jakarta Governor Heri Budi Hartono asked all government ministries and institutions with offices in Jakarta to apply work-from-home (WFH) policies for their employees. Official vehicles would also be replaced by electric vehicles. Environment Minister Bakar meanwhile said that they would closely monitor independent power plants in Jakarta and its surrounds.

These solutions all look good on paper, such as tightening control of industry and violators being subject to being taken over by the government. But can the government actually control the owners of big industry? The majority of President Widodo's cabinet and House of Representatives (DPR) members are businesspeople or have links with big conglomerates, likewise also those who sit in the administration.

They are also the ones who when workers demand wage increases always respond by claiming that productivity is low and the company is suffering losses. They are free to criminalise and repress farmers fighting against land theft. They are also the ones who used all kinds of trickery and

repression to push through the enactment of the highly unpopular Omnibus Law on Jobs Creation, which they themselves benefit from.

The private PLTUs that contribute to air pollution are owned by people like Pandjaitan, Tourism and Creative Economy Minister Sandiaga Uno, State-Owned Enterprises Minister Erick Thohir, business tycoon Aburizal Bakrie, former State-Owned Enterprise Minister Dahlan Iskan, former State Intelligence Agency (BIN) chief AM Hendropriyono, billionaire Arini Subianto, former Minister of Religion retired General Fachrul Razi, business tycoon Teddy Permadi Rachmat, mining and energy tycoon Wiwoho Basuki Tjokronegoro, Garibaldi "Boy" Thohir, owner of Indonesia's second-largest coal mining company, Indonesia's third richest person Prajogo Pangestu and palm-oil tycoon Martua Sitorus.

So then, why is public transport capacity only going to be increased during busy working hours? Public transportation should in fact be increased massively, meaning that all public transportation must be nationalised so it can be interconnected, not privatised. Decent wages and working conditions must be provided for public transport drivers. It must also be easily accessible, comfortable, cheap and punctual. And of course environmentally friendly.

Electric vehicles, which continue to be touted by the government as a solution to pollution, are not actually free from emissions or pollutants. The production of electric vehicles and their batteries use more energy and release more carbon dioxide than conventional vehicles. This is also closely related to how electricity is used and how it is produced: will it be from burning coal or from renewable energy sources?

Unfortunately, in the past five years, the share of coal-based energy increased by almost 10 percent, reaching 67.21 percent of the national energy mix in 2022, while at the same time renewable energy only grew by 1 percent to 14.11 percent.

Every kilowatt-hour of batteries capacity produced for electric vehicles results in 150-200 kilograms of carbon dioxide being emitted. The production of a single electric vehicle produces 17.5 tons of carbon dioxide. So even if every single vehicle was electric, a huge amount of carbon dioxide would still be produced.

The other problem with producing large numbers of electric vehicles is that mining the metals for the production of batteries and other components is rife with rights abuses and violations of workers' rights. Around 100 thousand mine workers in the Congo rely on simple equipment to obtain cobalt. The work is extremely dangerous and often results in accidents and even death. Wages are also very low. Meanwhile lithium in Chile is obtained by seizing indigenous people's land and damaging the environment. It is not uncommon for lithium mines to employ child labour. Elon Musk, who is so highly praised by people like Widodo and his ministers, supported the coup d'état against Evo Morales in Bolivia in order to obtain access to lithium.

And the ordinary people will not find it easy to shift to electric vehicles. Aside from the cost, which can be in the hundreds to billions of rupiah, electric power consumption is also high. Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB) research recommends that households should increase electricity capacity to 2,200 VA. For poor households with a 1,300 VA capacity or less, it would be impossible for them to recharge an electric vehicle.

So what's behind the government's push for electric vehicles as an environmentally friendly solution to pollution, to the point that the government is offering massive subsidies for people to buy electric cars and motorcycles?

Presidential Chief of Staff Moeldoko is the chairperson of the Electric Car Entrepreneurs Association. Pandjaitan has links with conglomerates such as the Hartono Brothers, Agus Lasmono, Bambang Soesatyo and Aburizal Bakrie, who all have interests in the electric vehicle business. Why is it that the elites and the conglomerates are always able to benefit when the ordinary people are suffering. Many of these people also saw their wealth increase significantly while ordinary people were impoverished by the Covid 19 pandemic.

There is a possibility that the problem will disappear with the onset of rain that is expected to begin in September. Rain helps dissolve pollutants floating in the air. Pressure on the government to take responsibility for the problem will subside, and electric vehicle and other industries will continue with business as usual. But the pollution problem will not go away. It will only ease subside temporarily then resurface in the future, perhaps even worse. We must act now.

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**Dipo Negoro** is a leading member of the Socialist Union (Perserikatan Sosialis)

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