

In Indonesia, the beginnings of a youth rebellion?

Friday 1 November 2019, by [LANE Max](#) (Date first published: 30 September 2019).

Since Sept 23, there have been student demonstrations in almost every province of Indonesia against numerous new Bills being tabled and passed by the outgoing Parliament. The first protest in the university town of Yogyakarta saw a turnout of 15,000 students, despite the rally call going out less than 24 hours before that.

While the students across Indonesia have largely similar demands, the movement is not yet nationally coordinated.

The Bills that the students are unhappy with include one that would weaken the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), some with clauses that would ban the “insulting” of the head of state, the Parliament and other state institutions, as well as a revised General Criminal Code that would criminalise sex outside marriage and other aspects of personal life.

What also upset the students was that the Parliament was at the same time vacillating in passing a law against domestic violence.

President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo has since made a concession by getting the political parties to postpone a vote on all these Bills, except the new revised law on the KPK, which has already been passed. Local media reports say that Mr Widodo is considering issuing a presidential decree annulling the revisions to the revised KPK law — although this has not yet happened.

The weakening of the much-respected KPK has been a central factor in sparking the current protests.

For one thing, the ongoing arrests by the KPK of members of the elite for corruption — 23 MPs of the current parliament have been arrested and in one region almost the whole local parliament — have destroyed the standing of politicians among youth.

However, it would be a major error to see the student movement as only, or even primarily, about the KPK, which is what most of the mainstream media and some politicians have been doing.

Fighting corruption was central to the spirit of Reformasi: The term expressing a desire for generalised reform and social progress after the fall of Suharto in 1998.

The retreat on fighting corruption has brought to the surface anger among youth that no progress has been made on many other fronts. What appears to have been unleashed is a very public beginning of a youth radicalisation, also encompassing high school students, with an agenda broader than corruption.

This radicalisation has been brewing for some time. After the fall of Suharto, the state gradually stopped prioritising ideological indoctrination in schools.

This has fostered a rapid and progressive modernisation of political and social thinking among a section of the youth over the last several years, particularly in this digital age where they have easy access to information online.

Their more liberal and progressive social values are reflected in the students' seven major demands. The Jakarta Post published one version:

1. Reject the Criminal Code Bill, revoke the KPK law and pass the Bill against sexual violence, among others.
2. Remove problematic KPK leaders picked by the House of Representatives.
3. Ban the Indonesian military and national police personnel from holding official civilian posts.
4. End militarism in Papua and other regions and immediately free Papuan political prisoners.
5. End prosecution of all activists.
6. End burning of forests in Kalimantan and Sumatra and punish corporations responsible for fires and revoke their permits.
7. Resolve human rights violations and put human rights violators on trial, including those at the highest levels of government; immediately restore rights of victims.

Students insist that all seven demands are equally important. Social media is awash with photos of demonstrators carrying posters covering all these demands.

Demands in the past seen as issues only championed by human rights non-government organisations can now be seen on posters held by university students. For example, there have been posters reportedly calling for Coordinating Minister for Politics, Law, and Security Affairs, ex-General Wiranto, to be brought before a human rights court.

Human rights organisations have accused him of being responsible for violations in East Timor and in Indonesia during the last months of Suharto's rule.

Defenders of President Jokowi have been making accusations that there are other forces behind the students, though producing no names or evidence. Students have rejected this accusation. The demonstrations are being organised by coalitions of diverse student organisations coming together at the local level.

While Indonesian youths are becoming progressive, the political elites are stuck in their conservative and authoritarian social outlook of the New Order, with its emphasis on the "elders" (the bapak-bapak) making sure that rules for everything are obeyed.

It is not uncommon to see youth on social media referring to Suharto-era political figures as dinosaurs. Reflecting the strength of the New Order outlook among the elite and state apparatus has been the arrest of activists over the last month (at least 12 detained or charged with organising demonstrations or tweeting criticisms).

Security forces have used tear gas and water cannons to break up the protests, resulting in injuries to students. Two students have also been shot dead.

It is not surprising that, even from within parliament, there have been calls for President Jokowi to

dismiss Mr Wiranto because of what is seen as a repressive response to the students' protests.

There has been a growing practice of shortening the term "orang baik" (a good person), which is how supporters of Widodo describe him, into OrBa, meaning New Order.

The government has been ignoring all of the students' demands except those to do with the Bills before parliament, and even then, no one knows whether they will be withdrawn.

It is most likely that the youth radicalisation which had been simmering in recent years and which erupted into the open this past week will be an ongoing if unpredictable process.

One part of the student movement, the student executive bodies that exist as student councils in many universities, has already refused a meeting with the President, after unsuccessfully demanding as a condition that it be televised.

Mr Widodo will be sworn in as the new President on Oct 20. The students have made it clear that they are not calling for his downfall. However, all the signs are that they will keep up the pressure for reform until they succeed.

How the second Jokowi presidency copes with this may be signalled by whether he removes any of his ministers most associated with the repressive responses of the last week or so.

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- TODAY ONLINE. Published 30 SEPTEMBER, 2019. UPDATED 30 SEPTEMBER, 2019:
https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/indonesian-politics-beginnings-youth-rebellion?cid=h3_referral_inarticlelinks_03092019_todayonline
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