

Anger on campus: Behind the student protests that have rocked Indonesia

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He was once a boy scout and member of a patriotic flag-raising team in high school.

But with student protests sweeping Jakarta and other cities in recent months in some of the worst civil unrest to hit Indonesia in decades, Manik Marganamahendra has emerged as an anti-establishment icon.

“Today we stand on Indonesian land, on land seized and corrupted by the oligarchy,” he bellowed through a sound system on a recent afternoon, standing on the bed of a pickup truck.

Thousands of chanting students, clad in the yellow, red and green jackets of their universities, swirled in front of him, watched closely by a line of riot police standing behind large coils of barbed wire.

“If elite politicians are able to make a coalition, why can’t the people?” he cried.

Draped from the truck was a banner bearing the slogan that has been the rallying cry for the student-led protests that erupted in September: “reform corrupted”.

The trigger for the protests was a government move to strip the country’s anti-corruption agency of some of its powers and pass a new criminal code that critics saw as a reversal of hard-won social and political reforms that followed the fall of the authoritarian Suharto government in the late 1990s.

But the protests have also attracted a broader swathe of activists pressing for a host of other causes that highlight a growing sentiment in Indonesia that a political and business elite is becoming increasingly beholden to special interests and less accountable to the people.

Workers are pressing for better conditions. Environmentalists want palm oil and timber companies to be more accountable for the forest fires that regularly blanket the region in smoke. Feminists are calling for the passage of an anti-sexual violence bill that has been blocked by politicians fearing a backlash from conservative Muslims.

Rattled by the increasingly violent protests, the authorities have delayed the passage of the criminal code, which would have banned pre-marital sex and penalised insults against the president.

However, President Joko Widodo has said that there are no plans to reverse changes to laws governing the Corruption Eradication Commission, which has prosecuted hundreds of politicians, officials and businessmen since its formation in 2002, saying the agency needed better governance.

The new law placed restrictions on the agency using independent wiretaps, among other measures.

Hundreds of people have been injured in clashes with the police. Five people have died during

protests. Police have announced the arrest of an officer over the deaths of two students, including one who died of gunshot wounds. But it is still unclear how the others died. Under pressure from families and human rights groups, Widodo has ordered an investigation into the deaths.

While the protests have lost some intensity in recent weeks, the students have vowed to keep up their campaign and are planning a demonstration on Sunday - National Heroes Day.

The movement will not run out of steam, Marganamahendra told *Reuters*. "We want the future to be better than today."

Unlikely leader

Students like Marganamahendra have been a critical force in the protests, helping to forge a loose network with the disparate groups involved.

"We want to show that a college student movement - any student movement - and a labour movement can unite," he told *Reuters* at a rally last month near the presidential palace, dressed in the yellow jacket of the University of Indonesia.

Quietly spoken and with a slight frame, the 22-year-old public health student is an unlikely figure to emerge as a leader of the protest movement. He comes from a modest background in the city of Bogor, south of Jakarta; his father is a motorcycle taxi driver, and his mother is unemployed.

But Marganamahendra has emerged as a powerful speaker and charismatic presence in front of the protest crowds, able to rally and organise the students. He has also become something of a celebrity in Indonesia, with local media running stories on everything from his favourite pastime (debating, reportedly) to his love life. On campus, other students ask him to pose for selfies with them.

He has also found himself targeted by trolls on social media who have questioned his motives and say the protests have been hijacked by people hoping to overthrow Widodo's presidency.

"I feel a certain pressure psychologically," he said.

Angry students

Marganamahendra's life today is a far cry from what it was in mid September when he and a handful of University of Indonesia students joined one of the first protests.

There, he met students from other universities and discussed coordinating activities. Soon, students from his university were meeting with a broad range of people with grievances against the government - farmers, union activists, feminists and others.

The media-savvy students and activists created punchy online hashtags to raise awareness of their campaign, and used crowd-funding sites like Kitabisa.com to raise cash for renting trucks and loudspeakers, and buying medical supplies and food. They communicated with each other using WhatsApp.

By the end of September, the rallies had grown into some of the largest seen in the country since the 1998 protests that helped bring down Suharto, with the size of the crowds put at over 52,000 at their height by news magazine *Tempo*, citing the National Police Intelligence and Security Agency.

"Many students on campus were angry, not just the type who get involved in student organisations," said Marganamahendra.

Nailendra, a student from Yogyakarta's Gadjah Mada University in Java, said there was a feeling of "having to do something" after heated discussions broke out at her campus canteen about the government bills, which she called "very unreasonable".

"We started with our small circle and then we used social media and brought in other groups and people to join the alliance," said Nailendra, who uses one name and is a spokeswoman for the People's Movement Alliance. "Now our group is very diverse."

List of demands

The demonstrators have also drawn inspiration from the protests that have rocked Hong Kong this year, Marganamahendra said.

Like their Hong Kong counterparts they have drawn up a list of key demands, with the Indonesians focusing on the anti-graft agency and the criminal code, as well as the removal of the military and police from government, making companies accountable for the forest fires, and freeing political prisoners in the restive region of Papua.

"The Hong Kong movement is really cool," Marganamahendra said.

The organised opposition and simmering discontent suggested by the protests could pose a challenge to Widodo as he starts a second five-year term, even though he is backed by parties controlling 74% of seats in parliament, analysts say.

The criminal code, which is championed by conservatives that Widodo has been reluctant to confront, is expected to eventually make a return.

"Depending on how the government proceeds with legal and political reform, there is a risk authorities could trigger a much wider protest movement," said Donald Greenlees, senior advisor to Asialink, a think-tank affiliated with the University of Melbourne.

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