

# Indonesia: New rebels, new movement, new hope

Monday 26 October 2020, by [Wagimanto](#) (Date first published: 22 October 2020).

**The scandalous passing of the “Job Creation” bill, or more accurately, the “pro-Big-Bosses-against-people-and-environment” bill on October 5, has been met with strong opposition from large sections of the Indonesian public.**

Protests began when the government proposed the draft bill early this year, and have been ongoing. Since the bill passed into law, more than 100,000 people have participated in street protests all over Indonesia, involving scores of civil society, labour, student and political groups.

The power of the protests has pressured at least three governors, three district chiefs and 15 regional and local parliaments to announce their support for the movement.

The government has persistently defended the bill and has made many attempts to weaken the opposition movement.

Government officials suggested to protesters that they channel their rejection through the Constitutional Court. Meanwhile, the parliament silently revised the Constitutional Court Law, adding a clause saying it is not obliged to carry out the court's decision.

The education department directed university authorities to control their students and ensure they do not get involved in street protests.

Police forcibly stopped high school students from joining the protests, humiliating them and threatening that they would not get jobs in the future if they became demonstrators.

Meanwhile, the government has spent Rp90 billion (\$8.6 million) on social media influencers (referred to as “buzzers”) to promote pro-Omnibus Law lies through social media.

## **Establishment panics**

The destruction and burning of public facilities during the October 8 mass action in Jakarta – despite the controversy over who was responsible – were blown out of proportion by the pro-government mainstream media, and amplified by President Joko Widodo's (Jokowi's) media followers, to attack the protest movement.

There were claims the movement was being controlled and used by a mysterious evil conspiracy, that people were paid to join the protests, and that the protesters do not understand what they are talking about.

The national police chief ridiculously announced that an extremist group was behind the violent actions.

The social division in society, between Jokowi's fanatical followers and critically conscious citizens, has widened. Even though most people do not trust the parliament, Jokowi's followers tend to support the new law, just because it was initiated by his administration.

Counter-demonstrations against "violent protest" by individuals who disagree with the new movement have occurred sporadically.

There are reports of right-wing paramilitary groups dispersing anti-*Omnibus Law* protests. Banners saying "Say no to anarchism and communism", and "Residents, please don't get involved in street protests" are appearing in different cities, often sponsored by right-wing paramilitary organisations.

People who join the mass actions are being demonised as "anarchists" and "communists". This has deep roots, dating back to the New Order era under the regime of former president Suharto, when black propaganda around communism made it a label to stigmatise critics and dissidents. In the Jokowi era, the regime has added the label "anarchist".

Recently, one of Jokowi's expert assistants even referred to ISIS as being involved in the opposition movement.

On the other side, activists have found evidence that the perpetrators who burned down and destroyed buildings during the protests are well-trained, well-equipped, organised, obviously different from other common protesters, and masters in agitating people to violence.

The evidence points to a classic intelligence operation, again harking back to the New Order era. Back then, in every protest, provocateurs would turn demonstrations into violence and chaos, so the regime could discredit and weaken the people's movement, and divert attention from the real issues. Mostly, the provocateurs were thugs, paid groups or the military.

## **Rebels of the future**

Two interesting aspects of the anti-*Omnibus Law* movement are the involvement of large numbers of high school students in street protests in many cities, and what has been referred to as the "anarchist" character of the mass actions.

Last year, Jokowi faced challenges by young people who rejected the controversial *Criminal Code* draft law and the revision of the *Corruption Eradication Commission Law*. This was the first time high school students began to take to the streets, and they became the rising stars on the stage of resistance against this unjust system.

The other aspect is the emergence of anarchists and anarchist groups, who are largely new activists in the social movements.

"Anarchist groups" is a loose category to describe a section of the mass actions that have not previously organised politically. They are independent and do not come from traditional movement enclaves.

Traditionally, unions, university students and progressive organisations are involved in street protests as contingents, with tight coordination, clear identification from their uniforms, banners and campus jackets.

These "new" elements are a phenomenon of the growing popular movement and the spectrum of actors becoming involved. Beyond political definitions, they represent a predominantly young, fresh and critical part of society that simply does not trust the establishment. They are angry and have

gotten involved in actions through a new mobilising tool — social media.

The renewal of youth activism flows from the disappointing social-political situation. Young people are sick and tired of an unjust life, corruption, oppression of marginalised actors, the greediness of the rich, poverty, big bosses ruling the country, an uncertain future – in short the fucked up reality of a system that, at the moment, is headed by Jokowi's regime.

Jokowi rose as a figure of hope for real social change, but has ended up being worse than previous presidents.

By playing on this rhetoric of “hope”, the regime has successfully co-opted and consolidated a significant section of society, including many critical activists and groups, from progressive liberals to leftists, who have historically been on the side of the rebels.

These previous allies of popular social movements now actively oppose any criticism of Jokowi, thus their control of political discourse needs to be smashed open by this fresh blood, which has seemingly come from “nowhere”.

### **Same old bourgeois regime**

Back in 2005, in Surakarta, Central Java, the people elected a new mayor — a friendly, seemingly humble person, without pretense, named Joko Widodo.

Jokowi gained public attention by initiating significant city improvement programs. In a proactive and “egalitarian” style, he came to people to hear their aspirations. He would, without hesitating, undertake sewerage works, and took his office cleaner's sick son to the hospital. He was the man of action and compassion.

Jokowi became a national media darling. Praised as a capable leader who took the job very seriously, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) promoted him to run for governor of Jakarta in 2012, and he won. After only two years in office, he was promoted to run for president in 2014.

The 2014 presidential race was antagonistic. Jokowi's opponent, Prabowo Subianto — an ex-general responsible for many human rights violations — gathered pro-big business political parties, conservative right-wing political groups and mass organisations to support him. They employed ultra-nationalist and Islamic populist slogans in their campaign.

On Jokowi's side were gathered a similar array of opportunistic big-business political parties, alongside pro-democracy, human rights and environmental activists, professionals, some leftist activists and groups, and young critical middle-class supporters concerned about good management and clean governance.

This broad alliance promoted Jokowi as the means to overcoming fascism, oligarchy and sectarianism, to advocate for ordinary people and the environment, at the same time fulfilling middle-class aspirations of a modern, professional, well-ordered Indonesia.

Jokowi won the 2014 election, and was re-elected in 2019. But he has brought almost no changes.

There has been no progress on human rights, rather, further setbacks, where gangsters and paramilitary organisations have been welcomed as government partners. More activists have been criminalised under Jokowi's government than any other president since the *Reformasi* (reform era).

Exploitation and destruction of natural resources has escalated dramatically. Following the last

election, a conservative Islamic cleric became vice-president, a mining magnate became the economic minister, greedy oligarchs run the country, and ordinary people struggle to survive.

The implementation of the ideology of developmentalism, initiated and established by Suharto, was continued by Megawati Sukarnoputri, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and now Jokowi. Under Jokowi, the scale of exploitation of people and the environment has become larger, more brutal and decadent.

Jokowi, with his motto, "Work! Work! Work!" has forged ahead with a huge infrastructure drive, in the service of big business interests, and an aggressive private investment strategy - all in the holy name of national economic growth.

The *Job Creation Law* is the latest in a series of new laws that deregulate mining exploration, undermine the power of the anti-corruption commission, and aim at legalising big businesses super-exploitation of people and the environment.

The Jokowi regime has also managed to build a very broad alliance of support, by providing significant political and economic concessions to the former elite opposition coalition headed by Prabowo.

Ministries have been granted, including the appointment of Prabowo as defence minister, thus curtailing any potential opposition.

At the same time, Jokowi enjoys great loyalty from previous critics of elite political rule. He has achieved this by offering important positions to high-profile pro-democracy, human rights, environment and other activists in the bureaucracy and state-owned companies. Opportunistic union leaders have been bought off, significant funds to NGOs provided, government research contracts awarded to universities, and festivals for artists and cultural activists funded.

These factors are behind the rise of ordinary people's struggles and the emergence of new actors in the social movements. New rebels, new forms, new mobilisation, new actors. New hope.

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## **Wagimanto**

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