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Indonesia

# From viral epidemic to social pandemic?

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**The now almost recurrent images of water and tear gas cannons come this time from Indonesia. Workers and students have invaded the streets of the main towns and clashed with the police. In the face of the epidemic, authorities have been slow to take action. The number of doctors per capita is around 20 times lower than European averages and President Jokowi, sometimes presented by the press as progressive, declared the country immune ... by religion: ginger and turmeric were advocated as remedies. To take up Rohana Kuddus's phrase describing the management of the epidemic in *New Left Review*: "Lemongrass and prayer". [1]**

## Antisocial attacks

As elsewhere, the cost of the epidemic is borne by the poorest who have sometimes had to leave the cities. This serves as a pretext to prevent protests and destroy social and environmental legislation. The pre-epidemic projects - notably a law known as "Job market creation" - have this objective. They target protections on working time which could be extended by four hours per day and propose the abolition of paid maternity leave and reduction of severance pay by 30%. And the list goes on. In addition, there is a reduction in legislative protection of the environment, particularly the forests, which have been ravaged by fires.

Denounced before the epidemic and then during the summer, these laws are now challenged in broader strikes and protests. From Monday, 5 October, the day the law was passed, thousands of workers demonstrated. The Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions announced a strike from Tuesday to Thursday with two million participants in the rallies. The demonstrators seemed determined and numerous and continued on Friday. If this then scared the main unions into calling for calm, demonstrations, especially by students, continued at the start of the following week.

## Instability and mobilizations

Jokowi has been facing a challenge from below for a year. Electorally victorious against Prabowo in 2014 and 2019, he could have appeared as the lesser evil. [2] But, during the 2019 election campaign, a slogan raised by abstentionists, "Vote for one, get the second free", summed up some of the feelings towards the corrupt and economically very unequal political system embodied by the two candidates for executive power.

As of August 2019, riots took place in West Papua (the part of the island under Indonesian rule) where the internet was cut, schools closed, and militia and soldiers were deployed. In September 2019, a significant number of students and high school students in uniform, followed by wider working-class circles, took to the streets in the face of a reactionary legislative package. The young people were protesting against corruption and laws criminalizing out-of-wedlock relationships, abortion, criticism of the government and the state or even "the teaching of Marxism-Leninism".

Jokowi has had to partially back down in the face of the student and high school youth. Behind this is the storm that could be raised by the 100 million inhabitants of the islands of the archipelago who survive on less than a dollar and a half a day, while a large working class, which has been growing for several decades in industry, mining or services, is mobilizing today to defend itself... and tomorrow impose another system?

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Translated by *International Viewpoint* from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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[1] Rohana Kuddus, "Lemongrass and Prayer", *New Left Review*, March-April 2020. See also by the same author "September Surprise", *New Left Review*, November-December 2019.

[2] Brother of a billionaire, Prabowo is the son-in-law of murderous dictator Suharto, ousted in 1998. Last autumn he became Jokowi's Minister of the Interior.