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Indonesia

Indonesia Is in the Middle of a New Protest Wave

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Indonesia’s new Omnibus Law was passed earlier this month, enacting a major series of counterreforms to workers' rights and the environment. In protest, tens of thousands of workers went on strike, and in dozens of cities, students took to the streets.

In recent weeks, Indonesia has seen a wave of mass protests and workers’ strikes in response to the government’s new so-called Omnibus Law — the collection of amendments to existing laws that are set to strip rights from workers and undermine environmental standards. Over nine hundred pages long, the bill was passed into law in on October 5 without even a draft being released to the public. Dozens of existing laws, including regulations on labor, mining, and environmental protection are affected.

Major trade union federations representing thirty-two labor unions called for a three-day nation-wide strike in opposition to the bill. Tens of thousands of workers, notably in the industrial areas, went on strike. Many more joined protests across Indonesia in dozens of cities across the archipelago. In dozens of cities, clashes took place as police tried to ban gatherings with the excuse of health precautions.

The bill was quickly passed into law as the public was preoccupied by the continuing health crisis, made worse by government mismanagement. In mid-February, as cases in the region were mounting, Indonesia’s minister of health claimed that the country was still completely free from the virus — thanks to prayer. The official death count is over thirteen thousand (widely assumed to be unrealistically low) making Indonesia one of the worse hit countries in the region. In April, trade unions had forced Parliament to suspend a debate on the bill. Now the bill has passed anyway.

Profit Over People

The Omnibus Law has been presented by the government as a step to “develop” the country, “create jobs” and remove “red tape” (code for weakening environmental protections). In a commentary, the free market cheerleaders of the *Economist* praised the law for slashing the “lavish mandatory benefits” of Indonesian workers that “discourage firms from creating jobs.” [1]

Similarly, the British Chamber of Commerce in Indonesia claimed that Indonesian labor is too expensive, and that the new law would better position Indonesia “as a genuine and realistic alternative to China” for international corporations looking to exploit cheap labor.

Provisions included would increase working hours, abolish paid maternity leave (and Indonesia’s trailblazing menstruation leave), reduce redundancy payments, and weaken protection against firing. The law also does away with inflation correction and cost of living criteria to determine the minimum wage, which varies significantly across the Indonesian archipelago.

On environmental issues, the new law makes it easier for corporations to avoid reports on the environmental impact of their activities. As the Indonesian socialist Frans Ari Prasetyo has pointed out, the law’s agrarian clauses “allow the government to build industrial estates, toll roads or dams on land seized from its individual owners, reimbursing the owner with less than the land’s value or, in some cases, not reimbursing them at all.”

The movement now mobilizing against these measures is as wide-ranging as the law itself. Progressive trade unions, leftists groups, and student associations have been mobilizing for the protests. The participation of workers, and high school and university students has been noteworthy.

Soon after the law was passed, workers across the country went on strike and joined protests, holding signs with messages such as “Omnibus law kills the future of our grandchildren” and “Colonization has ended but colonization of workers begins.” On social media, the hashtags #DPRRIKhianatiRakyat (#HouseBetraysThePeople), #BatalkanOmnibusLaw (#CancelTheOmnibusLaw) and #MosiTidakPercaya (#VoteOfNoConfidence) have proliferated.

Democracy Under Threat

Indonesian democracy has been under threat for some time, and the latest Omnibus Law reflects an emboldened the right-wing agenda. After popular protests in 1998 brought down the dictatorship of General Suharto (self-described as the New Order), the political power of the military (Tentara Nasional Indonesia or TNI) was curtailed — a scenario that was never fully accepted by the generals, who have never gone away. [2]

Indonesia’s current president, Joko Widodo, better known as Jokowi, came to power in 2014 and was reelected last year. Although presenting himself as a reformer — a “man of the people” and someone without ties to the elite of the old regime — under his government, military figures are winning back their former political power.

For example, in March, a national COVID-19 task force was established that included large numbers of army officers at both national and local levels. Military leaders have also been trying to increase their power as part of the country’s anti-terrorism operations and to gain more influence in the so-called Agency for Pancasila Ideology Education (BPIP), the body established by Jokowi in early 2018 to promote Pancasila, the official ideology of the Indonesian state.

As professor of Southeast Asian studies Jun Honna has pointed out, under the Jokowi presidency, the Indonesian military has been regaining lost ground on security affairs, and thanks to the COVID-19 crisis, has been able to fend off civil-society pressure for reform.

“It seems probable,” he writes, “that these developments will shape the new normal in post-pandemic Indonesia, because national lawmakers have no incentive to antagonize the powerful military at a time when it is enjoying public approval for its crisis management role.”

Indicative of the government’s right-wing direction of travel is the career of Jokowi’s rival Prabowo Subianto, a former Army lieutenant. In presidential elections in 2014 and 2019, Jokowi ran against Prabowo, the son-in-law of Suharto. Prabowo, who received US military training, was a commander of the infamous Kopassus, Suharto’s special forces that functioned as the regime’s iron fist.

He is implicated in many brutal human rights violations civilians by Kopassus forces during the East Timorese liberation struggle. [3] Prabowo himself is widely held responsible for the “disappearance” of progressive activists during the turbulent final days of the New Order. During the 1998 protests, Prabowo came to symbolize the crimes of the regime.

When Jokowi first ran against Prabowo in 2014, it seemed to many to be a competition between a liberal democrat and an authoritarian leftover of the Suharto years. Last year, Prabowo, declaring he wanted to “Make Indonesia great again,” deepened his alliance with Islamist right-wing forces even further.

Having lost the vote again, Prabowo went on to claim that he had been cheated of his victory. As a result, his supporters organized violent rallies that led to several deaths. But Jokowi, rather than scorning his rival, co-opted him

by appointing him minister of defense. Recently, Prabowo also received an invitation from the Trump administration. [4]

As a popular movement has developed to resist the Omnibus Law, the Indonesian state has responded with a combination of propaganda, intimidation, and violent repression. An official circular discouraged university students from joining the protests and asked faculty to promote the law.

Police officers were instructed to organize “cyber patrol” and “media management” to control the narrative. [5] Protest organizers receive unofficial personal visits from police officers trying to “dissuade” them from continuing their political activities. Students are threatened with being blacklisted and workers have been arrested for “striking outside of allowed hours.”

Especially reminiscent of the methods of the Suharto regime, according to Indonesian politics expert Edward Aspinall, has been “the government’s discursive response.” [6] Rather than addressing the protesters’ concerns, many government leaders have instead focused on “the alleged presence of shadowy forces manipulating them.” Accusations of a hidden dalang (puppet master) were a staple of the New Order regime’s propaganda strategy.

Also concerning is the extensive use of violence by Indonesian police force. Reports from a number of cities point to police beating protesters, using tear gas, and attacking medics and journalists. Over six thousand people have been arrested and hundreds of arrested individuals are currently unaccounted for.

The Fight Ahead

The final text of the Omnibus Law, which still has not been made public, is now sitting on the president’s desk awaiting his signature. Protesters are calling on Jokowi to repeal the law, a call echoed by major trade unions. The president, for his part, has rejected all criticism, and has told people they should take their case to court rather than joining street protests. Obviously, in the courts, the government and its allies would hold the advantage over workers and students.

The current wave of protests come about a year after a similar wave against the gutting of the widely respected Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) and attempts to introduce various other regressive laws. [7] While the movement forced postponement of several proposed laws, Jokowi did manage to force through the gutting of the KPK, whose existence hindered the kind of patronage and co-option that Jokowi increasingly relies on. Many of the other laws that were opposed by last year’s movement have now been included in the Omnibus Law.

Jokowi seems to think he can weather the current storm as well. However, more and more Indonesians are waking up to the reality of Jokowi’s government and its pandering to reactionary Islamists at the expense of women, minorities, and civil liberties. West Papua’s self-determination struggle is taboo for nationalists like Prabowo, but it is nonetheless continuing, and with support of the Indonesian left. [8]

The combined crisis, the threats to Indonesian democracy, the stagnation of post-1998 reform efforts, and attempts to curtail civil liberties and rights of minorities generate anger and opposition. Progressive trade union activists and the country’s small but active left are trying to mobilize the smoldering discontent. Regardless of the outcome of this latest movement, we are seeing only the beginning of the struggle.

*Source **Jacobin**.*

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[1] *The Economist*, 15 October 2020 “How not to reform Indonesia”, *Jacobin* 26 June 2020 “Liberalism Is as Bad as the Economist Makes It Sound”.

[2] *Jacobin*, 5 June 2018 “Indonesia’s Red Slaughter”.

[3] *Inside Indonesia*, April-June 2014 “Prabowo and human rights ”.

[4] *This Week in Asia*, 7 October 2020 “‘A loss for human rights’: with eye on China, US opens its arms to Indonesia’s Prabowo”.

[5] *The Jakarta Post*, 7 October 2020 "Unions brave police threat to protest jobs law".

[6] *New Mandala,* 12 O ctober 2020 “Indonesian protests point to old patterns ”.

[7] *Today*, 30 September 2019 “Indonesian politics: The beginnings of a youth rebellion?”.

[8] *Jacobin*, 23 September 2019 “An Uprising in West Papua”.