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Indonesia

# Indonesia hit by climate disaster and authoritarian power

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**Cyclone Senyar** [1] has caused deadly floods and landslides in several Indonesian provinces. The toll looks set to be very heavy, and the government's (non-)risk prevention policy is once again under scrutiny.

A week after the cyclone passed, it is still impossible to measure the full extent of the devastation in the provinces of Aceh, North Sumatra and West Sumatra. At least 961 people have lost their lives, with nearly 300 still missing, over 156,000 homes have been damaged or destroyed, entire villages have been wiped off the map, and the disaster-affected and displaced population numbers over three million, with more than one million displaced. Famine threatens in remote areas. Survivors' testimonies speak to the gravity of the situation. One example among many: a family had to spend three days on the roof of their house without food or water, waiting for the floodwaters to recede. Aceh's Governor stated bluntly that "many villages and sub-districts are now just names."

In recent days, torrential rains have also struck Thailand and Malaysia, directly affected by Cyclone Senyar, whilst Sri Lanka has been devastated by a separate cyclone, Ditwah, from the Bay of Bengal [2]. The intensity of these events is reportedly due to rare combinations of meteorological factors – yet the multiplication of so-called "exceptional" phenomena is one of the consequences of the deepening global climate crisis [3]. Environmental activists in Indonesia emphasise how the devastation has been notably worsened by deforestation, largely driven by the mining industry and agribusiness, and facilitated by endemic corruption in the administration [4]. This observation is shared in the other affected countries.

The government knows that its inaction in the face of the immense social and climate suffering of the popular classes is fuelling revolt. Indeed, last summer Indonesia witnessed one of the major "generational revolts" against elite corruption, of which Asia has been one of the epicentres, with several regional parliaments being set ablaze [5]. The regional echo of this revolt was all the greater given that the country has some 285 million inhabitants, at the crossroads of the Indian and Pacific Oceans – a giant archipelago stretching to the edges of Australia.

After a moment of hesitation in the face of the massive protest, President Prabowo Subianto [6] opted for a heavy-handed approach. More than 4,000 protesters have been arrested since August [7]. The role of the army within the regime and its freedom of action are being strengthened. With the government's approval, pressure from radical Islamist movements on society is becoming more intense. As a final provocation, the president decided to display his historical lineage by proclaiming dictator Suharto [8] a "national hero" on 10 November 2025 (National Heroes Day) [9] – a man responsible, 60 years ago, for one of the greatest massacres in history. On 30 October, GEMAS [10] (the Indonesian acronym for the Civil Society Movement to Bring Suharto to Justice) sent an Open Letter to the authorities opposing such rehabilitation. This open letter was signed by 185 organisations and 256 individuals [11]. By making Suharto a hero, Prabowo is loudly announcing a radical end to the historical democratisation process begun in Indonesia (already undermined by his predecessor).

Progressive press organs, such as *Tempo*, are being dragged through the courts [12]. This return to the dictatorial past is, for the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) [13], equivalent to "escaping from the tiger's jaws only to fall into the crocodile's mouth". The attacks are not only legal and financial. On the island of Papua [14], in October 2024, vehicles in the car park of the *Jubi* media outlet were set ablaze with Molotov cocktails and two soldiers were identified through CCTV footage and witness testimonies. Yet the case remains unresolved: after police transferred it to Military Command, TNI [15] investigators rejected it citing "insufficient evidence", creating a legal stalemate that amounts to impunity.

Investigative journalists are not the only ones in the firing line. A blacklist of progressive authors (from Karl Marx to the celebrated Indonesian writer Pramoedya Ananta Toer [16]) has been drawn up. The possession and distribution of their works can be treated as criminal acts under regulations dating from the Suharto era that remain in force [17], with police raids and confiscations continuing. Worse still, protesters have been labelled "traitors to the nation" – one of the most serious legal accusations, dating back to the colonial era.

Progressive movements are now threatened by repression, aimed at stifling any popular contestation. However, Indonesian civil society has decades of experience. It is fighting tooth and nail against the regime's growing authoritarianism and the regression of democratic rights and spaces [18]. Repression of trade union activists is intensifying, as is the denial of the rights of indigenous peoples confronting the extractive industry or the construction of mega-projects whose environmental and health costs are exorbitant.

*Image caption: Action against a government child nutrition programme using industrialised food products dangerous to their health.*

In this general context, social and gender inequalities are growing. Women's movements are participating on the front lines of collective resistance. Komnas Perempuan [19], Indonesia's national human rights institution specifically charged with combating violence against women, is recording a rise in violence against women, including femicides. The government is conspicuously passive, despite the urgency of the situation.

The subordination of women and the subordination of the proletariat go hand in hand, particularly in industrial zones and the informal sector, where working conditions can be inhumane and the workforce is predominantly female. This issue has always been at the heart of the activities of the Free Women association [20], which on 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women) held actions in Jakarta, Samarinda, Palu and Manokwari [21].

Numerous movements have mobilised repeatedly in recent months, on multiple fronts, including Amnesty International Indonesia, KontraS [22], the trade union federation FSBPI [23], Greenpeace Indonesia, Musicians – People's Movement, WALHI-FoE Indonesia [24], Social Justice Indonesia (SJI), Young Movement Against Criminalisation, and others. A union of political prisoners was even established in October, with the support of Tapol [25], whose activities date back to the years of the Suharto dictatorship. The Free Women movement and the Indonesian Women's Alliance, which we have supported, have played a very active role in democratic resistance. We express our solidarity to all these organisations.

10 December 2025

Translated by Adam Novak for [ESSF](#).

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- [1] Cyclone Senyar is a powerful and exceptionally rare tropical cyclone. Tropical cyclones are extremely rare in the Strait of Malacca and Indonesian waters due to their proximity to the equator, where the Coriolis force is insufficient to generate cyclonic systems.
- [2] On Sri Lanka, see Balasingham Skanthakumar, « The Great Flood: Climate Disaster Exposes Sri Lanka's Neoliberal Trap », Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières, December 2025, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77220>. See also Socialist People's Forum, « Urgent Call for Solidarity: Support Sri Lanka's Flood and Landslide Relief Efforts 2025 », December 2025, <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77223>
- [3] On Indonesia and climate change, see Yuyun Harmono (WALHI), "Climate emergency: Indonesia faces catastrophic floods, disappearing islands", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières, February 2020. Available at: <http://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article52014>
- [4] On Indonesia's environmental and climate challenges, see "Indonesia faces a food and climate crisis", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières, September 2025. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article76420>
- [5] Regional parliament buildings (DPRD) were burned in Makassar (where three people were killed), Bandung, and West Nusa Tenggara during the August-September 2025 protests. On the 2025 protests, see Indonesian Women's Alliance (API), "Indonesia: Stop State Violence! Revoke Parliamentary Facilities and Allowances! End Repression Against the People! Deliver Justice for Victims!", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières, September 2025. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article76102>
- [6] Prabowo Subianto is a former general who served under the Suharto dictatorship. He was elected president in 2024 and took office in October that year.
- [7] Amnesty International documented 4,194 arrests between 25 August and September 2025. KontraS (Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence) recorded similar figures, with additional arrests continuing into October. See "Amid the Hunting of Activists and Surge in State Repression, Human Rights Day Action is a Political Imperative for the People's Movement in Indonesia", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières, December 2025. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article77259>
- [8] Suharto ruled Indonesia from 1966 to 1998. His "New Order" regime was responsible for the mass killings of 1965-66, in which an estimated 500,000 to one million people accused of communist sympathies were murdered. Prabowo Subianto was Suharto's son-in-law and commander of the Kopassus special forces, which were involved in human rights violations in East Timor and West Papua.
- [9] The title was conferred via Presidential Decree No. 116/TK/2025 at a televised State Palace ceremony. Suharto's children received the title on his behalf.
- [10] GEMAS stands for *Gerakan Masyarakat Sipil untuk Mengadili Soeharto* (Civil Society Movement to Bring Suharto to Justice).
- [11] See "GEMAS Open Letter - 185 Institutions and 256 Individuals Reject National Hero Award for Suharto", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières, October 2025. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article76896>
- [12] Agriculture Minister Amran Sulaiman filed a Rp 200 billion (approximately EUR 11.8 million) lawsuit against *Tempo* magazine in July 2025 over its critical coverage of the state rice distribution programme. In November 2025, a Jakarta court ruled it lacked jurisdiction, but the Ministry has appealed. See Mark Johnson, "Indonesian press freedom collapses under Prabowo presidency", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières, October 2025. Available at: <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article76958>
- [13] AJI (*Aliansi Jurnalis Independen*) is Indonesia's independent journalists' union, founded in 1994 during the Suharto era to defend press freedom.
- [14] Papua (formerly Irian Jaya) is the Indonesian-administered western half of New Guinea, where a long-running independence movement faces ongoing military operations and human rights abuses.
- [15] TNI: Tentara Nasional Indonesia (Indonesian National Armed Forces).

[16] Pramoedya Ananta Toer (1925–2006) is considered Indonesia's greatest writer. He was imprisoned without trial for 14 years under the Suharto regime, notably on the prison island of Buru, where he wrote his famous tetralogy, the Buru Quartet. His works were banned during the New Order period.

[17] TAP MPRS XXV/1966 prohibiting communism, Leninism and Marxism remains legally valid. During the New Order, documented sentences of 7-8.5 years were handed down for possessing banned books. Whilst formal prosecutions are less common since a 2010 Constitutional Court ruling, police raids and book confiscations have continued, documented as recently as 2019.

[18] On the state of Indonesian democracy, see Kontras, "Indonesia: End the romanticism of reformasi, it's time to fight", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières, May 2025. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article74869>

[19] Komnas Perempuan (*Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan*) is Indonesia's National Commission on Violence Against Women, established in 1998.

[20] Free Women (*Perempuan Mahardika* in Bahasa Indonesia) is a feminist organisation based in industrial zones around Jakarta and Sukabumi, working on women's labour rights and gender-based violence.

[21] See Free Women, "Indonesia: women cannot win decent work and freedom from violence under this anti-democratic regime", Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières, November 2025. Available at: <https://europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?rubrique369>

[22] Kontras (*Komisi untuk Orang Hilang dan Korban Tindak Kekerasan*) is the Commission for Missing Persons and Victims of Violence, a leading Indonesian human rights organisation founded in 1998.

[23] FSBPI (*Federasi Serikat Buruh Persatuan Indonesia*) is the Indonesian United Workers' Federation.

[24] WALHI (*Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia*) is the Indonesian Forum for the Environment, the Indonesian member of Friends of the Earth International.

[25] Tapol (a contraction of *tahanan politik*, meaning "political prisoners" in Indonesian) is a UK-based human rights organisation that has campaigned for human rights in Indonesia since 1973, during the Suharto era.