

Observations on Class Struggle in Indonesia

written by Paul O'Banion | September 28, 2025



Less than a year after taking office, Indonesian president Prabowo Subianto faced the most militant anti-government protests in years. At the roots of recent street actions at the end of August, 2025 is the country's incredible inequality and rule by an entrenched political class. Already extreme, the gap between rich and poor is widening. The middle class has shrunk by 16% since 2019, and the elite is becoming ever wealthier, arrogantly so. Unemployment affects millions, while the working poor are being forced to pay higher taxes with less pay and for a longer work week. The average monthly wage for workers in February 2025 was 3.09 million rupiah, less than \$200. The country's unemployment rate hovers at 15%, more for youth, the highest in Southeast Asia.

Prabowo has launched ambitious national projects such as daily meals for millions of students and increases in military spending, forcing him to cut Jakarta's contributions to regional governments, which in turn have imposed steep local tax increases. Unconcerned with people's economic stress, the parliament voted themselves a substantial hike in monthly housing allowances, bringing their total monthly income to over 100 million rupiah, more than \$6,000. Their income taxes are paid by the central government. As people's living conditions deteriorate, their response was not long in coming.

In early August 2025, in Pati, usually a sleepy town in Central Java, people reacted militantly to the Regent's plan to raise land taxes by 250%. Although Regent Sudewo claimed he would not back down, citing the central government's drastic cuts to regional funds, protesters occupied the town square. Boxes of donated food flooded in to care for needy citizens. After police confiscated all the donations, protesters massed at Sudewo's office on August 13, tearing down the fence and demanding he meet them. Standing atop a police car, he apologized but once again explained he had no choice. Citizens responded militantly. They threw rocks and bottles at him, compelling him to run for cover and to rescind his new tax proposal.

No doubt people's successful revolt in Pati motivated subsequent movements, which kicked off on in late August. Daily demonstrations outside parliament in Jakarta soon became the new norm as people were angered by new tax hikes and lawmakers' voting themselves extraordinary benefits. Thursday morning, August 28, began as a 'normal' day of protest. Labor unions peacefully assembled outside Jakarta's parliament building to call for higher wages, tax reform, and adherence to existing labor laws. After workers dispersed, students surged around the building, demanding cancellation of politicians' new housing allowances and dissolution of parliament. That night, as people stayed in the streets, Affan Kurniawan, a 21-year old Ojol driver (an online motorcycle delivery/taxi service) was delivering a food order, when he was run over and killed by a 14-ton police water cannon. A co-worker suffered a broken leg.

Dismissed from his role as one of the most powerful generals in 1998 for his involvement in the disappearance of pro-democracy student activists, president Prabowo claimed to be 'shocked and amazed' by the death of the Ojol driver. He urged calm and ordered an investigation into 'ethical' issues related to Affan's death. The sudden eruption of militant actions across the peninsula compelled him to visit the family of the slain driver and to promise them government financial support for their lifetimes.

Affan's funeral procession was made up of hundreds of green-uniformed Ojol motorcycle drivers. These marginalized workers daily come face to face with Indonesia's stark inequality. They routinely pick up meals at luxurious malls and deliver them to middle-class homes. Their financial situation is so precarious that on December 8, 2024, Darwin Mangudut Simanjutak starved to death in Medan as he waited for a customer's order. The night before he died, he had complained to a friend that he hadn't eaten because he didn't have any money. Six months later, on May 20, 2025, thousands of drivers who worked for the Ojol online platform took to the streets in 18 cities. The Indonesia Online Drivers Union reported that at least 12 of their members had died due to fatigue because workers sometimes were on the job 18 hours per day. These drivers represent thousands of others who have also been denied the benefits of the country's economic development. For years, they have struggled to get improvements to their wages and conditions only to suffer from recent tax increases and wage reductions. They took the lead in the 2025 uprising.

Despite the president's appeal for calm, people refused to obey. After Affan's killing, '*Pembunuh*' (murderer) graffiti suddenly appeared on the streets of many cities. A leading student organization called on all citizens to join them in the streets, noting that, 'An institution that should protect has turned into uniformed executioners, trampling the dignity of civilian citizens.' On Friday, August 29, rallies and protests were organized across the archipelago. The national parliament in Jakarta was surrounded and besieged. More than 45 bus and subway stations were destroyed, as were highway toll booths and carefully selected police buildings. The basement and first floor of a large police headquarters in East Jakarta was heavily damaged by fire. Hundreds of protesters massed outside the headquarters of Jakarta Police's elite Mobile Brigade (Brimob), the unit blamed for Affan's death, throwing firecrackers as police responded with tear gas. A determined group of protesters, screaming '*Pembunuh*,' tried to tear down the gates of the notorious unit, and pulled down a sign from the building's exterior. The city's population overwhelmingly supported the protesters. In one neighborhood where people sought refuge, residents 'formed a human barricade to keep security forces out. Women jabbed the authorities with brooms to chase them away.'

The country suddenly erupted in a literal firestorm that spread across the country. Regional parliament buildings were set afire in Martaram and Bandung in West Java. Protests spread to other major cities, including Solo, Magelang, Malang, Bengkulu, Pekanbaru, Medan in North Sumatra, Semarang in Central Java, and Manokwari in Papua. In the country's second largest city, Surabaya in East Java, people mounted a sustained attack on police headquarters, fighting with fireworks and wooden clubs against tear gas and water cannons. During the battle, they destroyed fences and set police vehicles on fire. In Yogyakarta, people besieged the regional police headquarters for five hours. Several government vehicles, a police service center, and a traffic post were set afire. Water barriers were attacked as well, forcing closure of the northern ring road.

The next day, Saturday, August 30, people's anger continued to be expressed. Large buildings containing the regional parliament and city council in Makassar, Sulawesi went up in flames. Three government workers were trapped in the conflagration and jumped to their deaths from the third floor. Another person was mistaken for a police spy and perished after being attacked by a crowd. In Solo, former President Jokowi's hometown, the parliament building was also torched. Led by Ojol drivers in green jackets and students, a crowd in Cirebon set upon the parliament building, causing a fire in which the parliament building including court documents, chairs and tables burnt to the

ground. In Martaram, on Lombok island, protesters set fire to the massive regional parliament, leaving only charred remains. Newspapers reported that the parliament building in Pekalongan, Central Java, was also burnt. In Jambi as well as in Surabaya, the vice-governor's official residences went up in flames. Across the country, at least 42 buildings, 32 police posts, and dozens of motorcycles, cars and buses were burnt. Altogether, ten people died during the uprising, six from police violence. More than one thousand people were injured and over three thousand arrested.

At a televised press conference on August 30, the head of the country's police and the army commander refused to apologize for the murderous state violence. Instead, they blamed anarchists. By dawn on August 31, stunned citizens observed dozens of burnt shells of buildings, charred cars surrounded by rocks, and bottle fragments covering streets in many cities. As television news teams surveyed the damages from the street fights, their headlines uniformly declared, 'anarchists harm the public good.' Damages were estimated to be in excess of \$54 million.

Reforms Enacted

Later on the afternoon of August 30, president Probowo condemned excessive police actions and promised to respect peaceful protests. More ominously, he also warned that some protests could be 'treason and terrorism.' He revoked the monthly living allowance MP's had voted themselves and enacted a moratorium on government paid foreign travel. Political parties subsequently apologized for statements made by some of their members, who were then penalized for their 'insensitivity.'

Clean-up crews worked at a feverish pace to clear streets of burnt out vehicles and to repair public transportation infrastructure. Of hundreds of people injured, dozens remained hospitalized, according to Street Paramedics Organization. Negotiations began for release of arrested people and for punishment of police involved in the killing of Affan. One eyewitness to Affan's murder publicly stated that the Brimob vehicle 'suddenly sped through the middle of the road without paying attention to the gathered crowd,' a claim substantiated by video footage. Officials detained seven Brimob officers for 'ethical' questions in connection with the driver's death. Not surprisingly, government investigators waited until September 2 to announce who was behind the wheel when they named Chief Brigadier Rohmat. Also riding in the front was Police Commissioner Cosmas Kaju Gae. Cosmos was expelled from the force and Rohmat will face criminal charges.

After Probowo rescinded the new housing allowances and declared a moratorium on all-expense paid lawmakers' foreign trips, at least five lawmakers were sanctioned. Eko was suspended as secretary-general of National Mandate Party (PAN). Apparently the final straw came after people criticized parliament members dancing to celebrate their housing allowance raise. Eko posted a video mocking people angered by the dancing. Ahmad Sahroni was also made to step down from parliament by his NasDem Party, mentioning that his statements 'have offended and hurt the feelings of the people.' Another party member, Uya Kuya, was shown dancing over a caption reading, 'just dance with it, you guys thought that Rp3million a day was a lot.' She was also suspended.

New repressive measures have been enacted after Probowo warned that protests could be considered 'treason and terrorism.' Three newly created mobile patrols of hundreds of heavily armed police roam Jakarta. The country's police chief ordered his officers to shoot with rubber bullets anyone who enters Brimob headquarters. The University of Indonesia and many schools suspended all in-person classes and replaced them with online formats for a week. Government employees in Jakarta were ordered to work from home. About a dozen people thought to be 'key activists' were rounded up. As the streets quieted, the country returned to business as usual.

Many NGO's and think tanks offered advice to the government on how to defuse protests. At first, people's demands included the arrest of Minister of Culture Fadli Zon because of his denial of 168

rapes during the 1998 uprising, investigation of former president Jokowi for widely suspected corruption, and termination of police chief Listyo. On September 1, a group of social media influencers issued what would become the most prominent set of demands, 17 proposals for short-term reforms to be implemented by September 5 and eight more significant policy changes to be made within the next year. With days, the parliament quickly responded by rubber stamping the already enacted end to housing allowances, paid foreign trips and other perks for MP's. They insisted that deactivated MP's would receive no future benefits pending an investigation into their ethics. Finally, they promised to conduct ongoing monitoring of MP's ethics and to insure 'meaningful' public participation in the legislative process. Although swiftly mandated and widely publicized, left out of the government's response are key issues such as withdrawing the army from civilian functions and insuring 'fair labor conditions.' Such political reforms are of little consequence to the poor.

The police released nearly all prisoners, keeping several dozen they deemed to have been central to the uprising, and they arrested six more activists thought to be instigators. No action was taken to enact changes to the other 17 demands, such as an end police brutality, the arrest of all officers who perpetuated human rights abuses, and 'reasonable' wages. Commissions were formed and meetings with trade unions held, but nothing further has been accomplished.

Protests continue to take place across the archipelago, but they are largely peaceful. Watched by dozens of police, more than 500 protesters assembled outside parliament on Monday, September 1, in Jakarta, and thousands more rallied in Palembang, hundreds in Makassar, Yogyakarta and Banjarmasin, Borneo. Despite assurances that peaceful protest would be tolerated, many people were not so sure the government would respect free speech. The first to test the waters was the Indonesian Alliance of Women. Dressed in pink, hundreds of women brandished brooms on Monday, September 1 to 'sweep away the state's dirt and police repression.' Soon students staged 'picnics' in front of parliament, and civil society groups openly called for reform. Yet other NGO leaders were arrested. More than 40 online 'provocateurs' were detained by police during the first week of September. Prabowo also promised to promote all police officers injured during the protests, including those who may have committed unnecessary acts of violence. The 17-8 demands continue to spur daily vigils and protests, but public enthusiasm and government action remain unknown.

Clearly, recent street actions and looting have stoked fear among the elite and middle class. The uprising has also provided new energy and pride to Ojol drivers and marginalized citizens, a palpable change that could be one of its most important outcomes. Prabowo has already done two important about-faces. Although he had initially canceled a long-planned trip to China to attend a commemoration of the victory in World War 2, he changed his mind on September 2 despite his declaration of a moratorium on officials' foreign trips. More significantly, he had initially expressed sympathy for Affan's family, but on August 30, he promised that firm responses will meet 'anarchist acts,' damage to public facilities, and looting of public and private properties. Many people live in fear that state violence may become more murderous.

On September 8, the normally centrist *Jakarta Post* revealed the deep mistrust that the upper middle class has for the poor. Describing the uprising as 'vandalism, looting and mob attacks,' the editors called on 'labor unions to take a step back and look at the bigger picture of society as a whole rather than focusing on their members.'

Elite Arrogance Spurred the Popular Response

After students called for the dissolution of parliament, Ahmad Sahroni, an influential member of parliament, called that perspective 'a foolish mentality...That kind of person is the most stupid person in the world.' After Sahroni repeated his remark, he left for Singapore. While he was gone,

hundreds of outraged people surged into his private residence. They looted it while soldiers stood by, pleading with people not to burn the house. The army watched as people carried away the bathtub, refrigerator, washing machine, furniture, and expensive designer bags. A watch valued at more than \$300,000 was among the appropriated items. Liberated dollars and rupiah were thrown into the air for all to share in the expropriated cash.

Eko Patrio, another member of parliament and a popular social media influencer, served as DJ for a dance party in parliament after pay raises had been enacted. His outspoken celebration led people to converge on his residence. He engaged the protesters, claiming 'everybody makes content.' After he left for China, his residence (one of many he owns in Jakarta) was looted. People also streamed into the houses of finance minister Sri Mulyani and Uya Kuya before taking all their belongings.

Crass public statements made by leading Indonesian government officials have continually made news. When minister of human development Pratikno was asked by a journalist about a large worm killing a young child, he publicly laughed out loud. Pratikno pointed to his 'tired eyes' before breaking into laughter. The five-year-old child named Raya had been diagnosed with tuberculosis. Once in the hospital, a worm began to come out out her nose. After she died, tapeworms weighing approximately one kilogram were found inside her body. The country's minister of health later claimed infection, not worms, were the cause of death.

After her house was looted, highly regarded Finance Minister Sri Mulyani, guardian of the country's financial health for two decades, wrote on her Instagram page that, 'Law, reason, and civilization seemed to vanish alongside my possessions. The humanity we cling to was trampled without regard. The wounds left behind, the dignity shredded, it's absurd.' If she had only known that within days Nepal's finance minister Bishnu Prasad Paudel would be humiliated, stripped down to his underwear in the streets, and forced to swim away in a river by enraged protesters. If she had a crystal ball, she might have made mention of the absolute poverty so many in Indonesia suffer, of stunted growth of children, of the threats constituted to people on the edge of life by her policies. Instead, on August 13, she bluntly stated that meeting tax obligations is 'the same as' Islamic alms giving (*zakat*) and endowments (*waqf*). On August 15, she had announced her plan to increase tax revenues by 13.5% in 2026, seen by the poor as an affront while lawmakers joyfully celebrated their increased wealth.

Looking to the Future

Within the current constellation of Indonesian party politics, Prabowo enjoys a 'big tent' coalition with support from more than 80% of parliament. This huge majority has two salient effects: he has almost unlimited power to steer the country in any direction he chooses, and those who oppose him have limited options other than to take to the streets. Conspiracy theories abound. Did Jokowi and the 'Soto gang' sponsor the rally on August 25 in order to boost vice-president Gibran? Are the military taking the side of Prabowo and seeking to channel protests against his opponents (Jokowi's supporters)? At times, soldiers stood by and watched the looting, even handing out drinks and money to protesters. In the midst of street fighting, who was the army intelligence officer arrested at a gas station in Jakarta? Is there an ongoing power struggle between Jokowi and the police on one side and Prabowo and the army on the other?

Indonesia's uprising did not erupt in isolation. Beginning in 2022, Sri Lanka's youth massively attacked the Rajapaksa government, compelling the president to flee the country, after which his ancestral home and privately held family buildings were destroyed by crowds of angry youth. In 2024, Bangladesh's Gen Z rose up against the Sheikh Hasina government. After she authorized 'lethal force' on protesters that led to more than 1,400 fatalities, Hasina fled to India. A new interim government is led by Nobel-prize laureate Mohammad Yunus. Days after Indonesian protests in August, Nepalese Gen Z youth burnt down parliament and dozens of other government buildings,

and won a new interim government led a Sushila Karki, a respected jurist whom they chose.

All these recent uprisings have similarities in their spontaneous eruption, absence of centralized leadership, distance from existing political parties, prominent role played by students, and attacks on the private residences of politicians. The one-piece pirate flag has been part shared in the symbolic arsenal of people in the streets. Their threat to those in power has yet to run its course.

Whether or not elite machinations and symbolic reforms will keep the lid on Indonesian protests remains to be seen. In the short run, reforms will certainly placate some people, while others continue to press for more accountability from parliament and reform of police. Will the working poor go back to accept overworked lives of impoverished existence? What is clear is that Indonesia's economic structural imbalance cannot be maintained without fundamental changes. People debate whether martial law or eradication of poverty is what the future holds. Indonesia is a huge country ruled by nine families, the 'nine dragons,' who dance atop a pyramid of millions of people living on the edge of survival. How long that system can be maintained is a question increasingly being asked.