Popular Struggle for Democracy in Indonesia

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Only four months into his presidency, newly elected Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto, faced nationwide protests against his many controversial policies. The movement was led under the theme *"Indonesia Gelap"* ("Dark Indonesia"), representing the bleak and unsettling nature of the new administration's policies. The online campaign was also massive, with thousands of #IndonesiaGelap hashtags spreading across different platforms alongside the image of the national emblem on dark backgrounds. The street protests took place over the course of at least one week, from 17 to 21 February 2025. The "Dark Indonesia" movement gradually served as a symbol of resistance against the government's troubling agendas. In March, a second wave of protests across the country also incorporated the "Dark Indonesia" theme alongside the slogan #TolakRUUTNI (Say No to the Revised Military Law). These protests were directed at the newly revised military law that would expand the military role in the government. Protests continued throughout April in several cities. In Jakarta, the demonstrators set up camps in front of the parliament building, which were repeatedly subjected to forceful attempts by the police to disperse them.

The increased social movements in the country have to be situated in light of the overwhelming consolidation of power by elites. This leads to very limited, if not non-existent, opposition to check power, which undermines democratic aspirations. The Indonesian experience highlights how popular control remains one of the most crucial safeguards for the survival of the country's democracy in the face of consolidated power and unreliable internal checks.

Why protests happen

A range of social and economic policies introduced at the outset of Prabowo's administration provoked significant backlash, eventually setting off the "Dark Indonesia" protests. In particular, the massive budget cuts of 306 trillion rupiah, or 19 billion dollars, presented as a strategy for efficiency, have been highly criticized as a form of austerity. The government intends to allocate this budget to support Prabowo's flagship program of free nutritious school meals and his questionable ambition of Indonesia's new sovereign wealth fund, called Danantara. There are significant concerns over the implications of these budget cuts for other essential public sectors, particularly education and healthcare, and for the development and maintenance of basic infrastructure. The daily management of government ministries has also been adversely affected by this policy, with restrictions on essential needs such as drinking water, toilet paper, air conditioning, and elevator use.

The first "Dark Indonesia" movement put forward in total 13 demands ranging from free education to calling on the government to review the budget cuts, the free meals program, and the problematic national strategic projects. Many national projects such as the development of the new capital city and food estates which started under the previous administration of President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), have faced protests over issues of land-grabbing, violence, and the disregard for the rights of local communities. Other demands include protecting indigenous people, implementing police reforms, downsizing the currently bloated cabinet, removing the military from civil positions, and dismissing the Mineral and Coal bill that could be detrimental to the environment. Some of these issues are not new and were already raised during the previous government, indicating the persistent and escalating nature of the issues.

The second nationwide movement in March highlighted the controversial proposed amendments to the Military Law that undermine civil supremacy and risk returning the country to its authoritarian pasts when

the military had significant control. Some provisions in the draft include increasing the military retirement age, giving the president the discretion to appoint members of the military to ministerial roles, and allowing active-duty officers to hold civilian posts, including positions in the Supreme Court, Attorney General's Office, and the Coordinating Ministry for Political and Security Affairs.

What it might indicate

The social movement indicates serious underlying issues with Indonesia's democracy and constitutionalism. The growing disapproval of government policies cannot be separated from the absence of meaningful opposition to exercise checks and balances. Prabowo's administration has firmly consolidated its power with virtually no opposition. This allows the administration to push its agenda largely unchecked. Moreover, the public has been largely excluded from meaningful participation in the policymaking process.

Indonesia's democratic decline and risk of authoritarian reversal has been facilitated by the absence of meaningful democratic opposition. This is the result of the previous administration's success in consolidating power and suppressing political opposition under Jokowi by incorporating former political opponents into his administration and dismantling opposition societal networks, including targeting vocal critics and influential figures.

In approaching the end of his final term in 2024, Jokowi is alleged to have intervened in the presidential election. His mobilization of power and state resources were arguably instrumental in enabling his eldest son, Gibran, to become the vice presidential candidate and securing Prabowo's presidential victory. Scholars have found that he exploited social welfare funds and state apparatuses, including the police, to secure votes for Prabowo and his son Gibran. Many believe that Gibran's candidacy was enabled by Jokowi's co-optation of the Constitutional Court, which altered the age requirement.

With a strong coalition of political parties formed since Jokowi's administration, Prabowo is increasingly seeking to not only continue the trends of strong executive and minimal opposition but also to escalate them further. Recently, Prabowo called for a permanent coalition of existing major political parties allies. Currently, the President's large coalition formally secures two-thirds of the national legislature, composed of six out of eight total parties. Such a call for a permanent bloc would further concentrate power and reduce any meaningful opposition. At the same time, the two remaining parties who lost the presidential election, the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP) and the National Democrats (Nasdem), have refused to be regarded as opposition parties, even expressing support for the government. Prabowo's ambition to minimize opposition to the greatest extent is also reflected in his excessively large cabinet, with 48 ministries and more than 100 ministers and deputy officials. Scholars and the public commonly refer to Prabowo's oversized cabinet as a practice of "*bagi-bagi kue*" (carving up the pie) in which strategic government positions were shared among his large coalition and loyalists.

With the diverse ethnic, religious, and regional representation in the cabinet, including non-party representatives, political elites often resort to cultural narratives of maintaining cohesion and unity to justify its large size. As some analysts have noted, Prabowo's oversized cabinet appears to reflect indigenous values of familial harmony. However, a closer look at the state's political and economic dynamics, including Prabowo's own deep oligarchic ties, seem to suggest that his drive to consolidate power is more pragmatic and material rather than sentimental and cultural. Prabowo and his strategic political ally, Jokowi, have powerful backing from the oligarchs, who have subverted the country's democratic institutions to entrench their dominance. The oligarchic interests represented by big business affiliations in the executive and the parliament were strongly suspected of influencing the passage of controversial laws during the Jokowi administration, including the amendments that curbed the independence of the Corruption Eradication Commission. In the 2024 presidential election, Prabowo and Gibran also had significant support from big businesses and Indonesia's wealthiest individuals,

particularly mining oligarchs. The inclusion of different societal elements thus cannot be seen as mere form of representation. Prabowo's huge coalition and cabinet are better understood in the context of enabling a system of patronage that dismantles internal checks and opposition.

The regime's consolidation of power has involved not only political parties but also influential organizations with a strong social base. The representation of such organizations in the new administration may add legitimacy to the government's controversial policies. For instance, two of the largest Islamic organizations with different traditions included in the cabinet, Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, have supported mining permits for religious groups, despite the policy being widely denounced by scholars and activists. Moreover, there is a possible interplay between material and power relations behind the support from different factions for the administration. For example, the public suspected that religious mining permits were part of transactional politics in exchange for the religious groups' political support. Thus, the regime's inclusion of various social organizations seems intended to gain their support and neutralize opposition at the societal level.

The people as democratic safeguards

Amidst the absence of effective institutional checks, Indonesia's democracy has been increasingly relying on popular control to restrain the power of dominant elites. Last year in August 2024, the social movement succeeded in pressuring the legislature to follow the constitutional court's decisions on regional elections, which the legislature had intended to override. These decisions were considered crucial for preventing further power consolidation in regional elections by the Prabowo-Jokowi alliance. This explains why the legislature's attempt to override the decisions angered the broader public.

The "Dark Indonesia" movement is the latest manifestation of popular struggle against questionable political decisions. The movement reflects the people's frustration against policies made in isolation of public scrutiny. Prabowo seems to exploit features of executive governance to bypass public accountability by using executive instruments to enforce public policies. He used a mere Presidential Instruction to legitimize budget cuts and a Presidential Regulation for the free meals program. These policies have major public consequences and should therefore be subject to legislative scrutiny and public oversight.

At the same time, however, legislative checks have become increasingly unreliable. For instance, the recent controversial bills concerning the Military Law and the Mineral and Coal Law, which went through the legislature, were passed in a hurry and without transparency and meaningful participation. In the case of the Military Law, the legislature held the deliberation without public access at a luxury hotel, and the draft was inaccessible on the official website. This underscores the absence of transparency in the process, which may suggest that something was being concealed from the public. Such a flawed process demonstrates the persistence of problematic patterns of rushed and non-participatory law-making from the previous administration. The ruling coalition has thus leveraged its overwhelming majority to pass legislation with limited scrutiny and opposition.

The constitutional court has also been an unpredictable medium for checking power, as it has been prone to attacks from the political branches. Recently, the legislature planned to expand its authority, which would enable it to recall sitting judges and thus undermine judicial independence. Although the public may utilize the court, faith in the judiciary must be exercised with caution and demands closer attention to the possible legal and political context that could compromise its independence.

Indonesia as a case study

The Indonesian case contributes to the discussion about the limits of internal controls through checks and balances in protecting democracy. Institutional checks are gradually being dismantled from within as elites continue to concentrate power. This prompted a greater push for public involvement in the political process. The public can act as an external control to challenge elite domination. Scholars have underlined

the importance of Indonesia's "vibrant, critical civil society" in safeguarding the country's fragile democracy. However, the struggle will certainly not be easy in the face of elites with greater capital and power. The movement is often defeated by far stronger elite control over state power, reflected in the outcome of large protests in 2019 and 2020 which failed to prevent the passage of controversial laws deemed harmful to democracy and rights. In the case of the "Dark Indonesia" movement, it remains to be seen to what extent the government will accommodate or ignore the public's demands as the discourse continues. Nonetheless, a more organized civil society movement to serve as external control is necessary in light of democratic erosion from within.

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