

Indonesian president supports military role in new “anti-terror” law

By John Roberts
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At a cabinet meeting in late May, Indonesian President Joko Widodo endorsed calls by his security ministers for the country’s armed forces, the TNI, to have a legal role in domestic counter-terrorism operations.

Amendments to beef up the Eradication of Terrorism law are currently under discussion in the national parliament’s lower house, the DPR. If passed, the legislation would significantly reverse the legal changes made following the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 to limit the military’s role in internal security matters.

Widodo expressed support for the military’s domestic role just days after the suicide bombings at Kampung Melayu transport station in East Jakarta.

Political tensions have been high in Jakarta following the right-wing Islamist campaign against Widodo’s protégé, Basuki Thahaja Purnama. Basuki was ousted during the hotly contested election for the governorship of Jakarta and jailed on May 9 for two years on concocted “blasphemy” charges.

A “terrorism” scare campaign is being fed by allegations that Islamist militants fighting in the Middle East will return to Indonesia. According to the *Diplomat*, security regional officials estimate that 1,200–1,800 South East Asians have been fighting with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The *Straits Times* puts the number of Indonesians at 392.

Before the cabinet meeting, State Intelligence Agency (BIN) chairman Budi Gunawan called for “extraordinary measures” to clamp down on “radicalism” and “terrorism.” He linked concerns over the emergence of Islamist groups, and their intervention in the Jakarta gubernatorial race, with “terrorism.”

The military is clearly exploiting fears over

“terrorism” to enhance its powers. The TNI was notorious under the Suharto dictatorship for its brutal suppression of any political opposition. After Suharto’s fall, the army was compelled to take a step back but retained considerable political power and influence, including via the ex-generals that held important government positions.

The National Police were removed from military control and given prime responsibility for all internal criminal matters. Under the 2004 Indonesian Military Law, TNI personnel are limited to assisting the National Police in counter-terrorism operations, and only under the direction of the president.

At the cabinet meeting, Widodo ordered his security ministers to pressure the DPR to expand the military’s role. Widodo told his ministers the change “is urgently needed to ensure that our law enforcers have the legal umbrella to carry out their jobs in the field. The [military] should have a role in the law.”

The police handling of alleged terrorist cases has been just as ruthless as the previous military methods. The police counter-terrorist unit, Densus 88, built up with assistance from the US and Australia, had been responsible for the deaths of at least 121 terror suspects in custody, according to Indonesia’s National Commission on Human Rights.

As well as boosting the army’s internal role, the draft legislation before the DPR seeks to further increase police powers put in place after the 2002 Bali terror bombings.

The proposed changes include the revocation of the citizenship of alleged terrorists; the further extension of the period of arrest and detention without charge; and a provision to allow the arrest and detention of suspected “terrorists” without trial for six months to undergo “deradicalisation.”

Widodo has made clear that the repressive measures are not just directed at so-called terror cells but at radical Islamist organisations that challenge the formally secular character of the Indonesian state and constitution.

More broadly the legislation is aimed against the working class and urban and rural poor amid growing opposition to pro-market restructuring and rising social inequality. The Islamist groups that mounted the anti-Basuki campaign could exploit the widespread hostility against the Jakarta governor's urban development projects that involved forced evictions.

Widodo's ruling coalition has been associated with the same pro-market agenda that Basuki pushed in Jakarta. Workers and the poor have seen one national administration after another pursue "growth" policies that have benefited only the rich. One percent of the population controls 49.3 percent of national wealth.

Meeting this week with media editors, Widodo reaffirmed his determination to clobber (*gebuk* in Indonesian)—a word used by Suharto—those who challenged the official state doctrine of Pancasila, the secular 1945 Constitution and "national unity." He said *gebuk* was the right word as "we cannot negotiate with people attempting to mess with our nation's fundamentals and ideology."

Pancasila enshrines belief in a divinity but does not prescribe a particular state religion and therefore stands in opposition to Islamist organisations that want to establish an Islamic state. Widodo confirmed that the Security Affairs ministry was looking to ban two Islamist groups, the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia.

The Islamist campaign against Basuki—an ethnic Chinese Christian—also had a strong anti-Chinese strand, which cuts across Widodo's efforts to secure up Chinese investment for his planned \$US450 billion in infrastructure projects.

Bachtiar Nasir, head of the GNPF-MUI Islamist umbrella group, told Reuters last month: "Our next job is economic sovereignty, economic equality. The state should ensure that it does not sell Indonesia to foreigners, especially China."

Significantly, Widodo's calls for the rapid passage of the new anti-terrorism measures have been endorsed by the Gerindra Party, which is led by Suharto-era general Prabowo Subianto. Prabowo was Widodo's main rival

in the 2014 presidential election and wants to replace him in 2019. The party's candidate won Jakarta governorship with the support of Islamist organisations, including the FPI.

Despite its collaboration with the Islamist campaign against Basuki, Gerindra is just as concerned as the government about mounting social tensions and the potential for mass political protests. Gerindra deputy chairman Ferry Juliantono endorsed the TNI's new role, declaring that in emergency conditions the new laws would "put state sovereignty above anything else."

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