

Protests in Indonesia against new criminal code met with “mass police violence”

By Oscar Grenfell
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Over the past week, mass protests have erupted in Indonesia’s major cities against attempts by the government of President Joko Widodo to introduce a repressive new criminal code and the rushed passage last week of legislation that will weaken an official anti-corruption body.

The demonstrations, which have been led by university students, have been met with violent police repression in a clear sign the authorities fear they could become a focal point of broader social opposition. They are among the largest anti-government student protests since the mass movement of workers and youth that toppled the Suharto “New Order” dictatorship in 1998.

The rallies followed Widodo’s presentation of the proposed new criminal code to parliament on September 15. The new laws, which would replace legislation dating back to the period of Dutch colonial rule, contain a number of anti-democratic measures apparently aimed at appeasing conservative Islamist forces, whose political influence has grown over recent years.

They have been brought forward in the wake of a fractious election contest during which Widodo’s main challenger for the presidency, Subianto Prabowo, sought to mobilise hardline Islamists as a key constituency of his campaign. All factions of the Indonesian ruling class are backing increasingly authoritarian measures, amid expanding economic, social and environmental crises.

Opponents of the code have warned that at least 18 provisions would impinge on the civil liberties and personal lives of ordinary people.

Extramarital sexual relations would be outlawed and punishable with up to a year’s imprisonment, while measures would target homosexuals and unmarried couples who cohabit. The bill provides for a

four-year jail sentence for women convicted of having unauthorised abortions.

There are also fears that the legislation could boost the authority of Sharia Muslim laws which operate at a local level in a number of provinces.

The religiously-inspired character of the code is demonstrated by its inclusion of a ban on so-called “black magic.” The dictatorial laws would also ban individuals from associating with any group accused of being Marxist or communist, and penalise “insulting” the president and other government executives.

Protests erupted on Monday, the day before the code was originally scheduled to be voted upon by the national parliament.

On Tuesday, tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered outside the parliament building in Jakarta.

The authorities responded with mass repression, with heavily armed police officers firing tear gas and water cannons at the protesters. Reuters cited police figures indicating that at least 365 students and 39 police officers were injured during clashes.

Despite this, protesters have continued to gather in the capital throughout the week. Mass rallies have also been held in Surabaya, the country’s second largest city, as well as in Padang, on West Sumatra, and Gorontalo, Sulawesi. Smaller rallies have been held in cities and towns throughout the archipelago.

Clashes have grown more intense, with Amnesty International yesterday issuing a call for an urgent probe of “massive police violence” against the demonstrators.

The appeal came the same day as the violence claimed its first casualty. A 21-year-old student was killed after receiving a chest wound at a rally in Kendari City on the island of Sulawesi. In an indication of the explosive anger fuelling the movement, the local

city parliament was reportedly torched on the same day.

The police crackdown has been orchestrated at the highest levels of government. Widodo has nervously responded to the demonstrations by postponing any parliament vote on the new code.

At the same time, the government Chief Security Minister Wiranto declared yesterday that the protests had been “hijacked” by an unnamed group that he claimed was seeking to “occupy the parliament” and disrupt Widodo’s official presidential inauguration next month. The comments were a clear greenlight for further repression.

The government is undoubtedly concerned that the demonstrators are raising social and political issues that are broader than the new criminal code.

Students have outlined a list of demands, other than the repeal of the code, including a call for the revocation of the new law governing the anti-corruption commission (KPK), which they claim weakens the body.

The bill has stripped the Corruption Eradication Commission of a number of powers, including to wiretap public officials suspected of wrongdoing, effectively stymieing its ability to conduct investigations. Its independence is also undermined, with the establishment of a committee to oversee its activities, and a requirement that its staff be civil servants, rather than independent observers outside of government.

Significantly, the demonstrators have also solidarised themselves with protesters in Papua and West Papua, who have been subjected to a vicious crackdown over the past months. The students have demanded an “end to militarism” in the provinces. Their call came as at least 32 people were killed in West Papua on Monday and ongoing reports of wholesale army and police brutality.

The protesters are also insisting on immediate action to extinguish massive forest fires raging in Kalimantan and Sumatra. The blazes, aside from damaging vast ecosystems, have intensified the annual toxic haze that engulfs much of the Indonesian archipelago, along with neighbouring countries, including Malaysia and Singapore.

The fires, which are resulting in massive carbon emissions and threatening millions of people with

respiratory issues, have in some cases been deliberately lit by companies seeking to clear their land. There is widespread anger that successive governments have done nothing to stop the practice.

In comments to the *New York Times* earlier this week, Obed Kresna Widyapratistha, a student at Gadjah Mada University in the city of Yogyakarta, gave a sense of the sentiments animating the students. He stated: “As a citizen who looks at the government from the outside, I feel that Jokowi has compromised too much with the New Order generals, with the political parties, with the political oligarchs in this country. I am very disappointed.”

As in Hong Kong and internationally, the emerging struggles of workers and youth in Indonesia are motivated by anger over growing social inequality and the dominance of a tiny corporate and financial elite. In 2017, Oxfam ranked Indonesia the sixth-most unequal country in the world. In a country of some 264 million people, the four richest individuals have a combined wealth greater than the poorest 100 million.

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