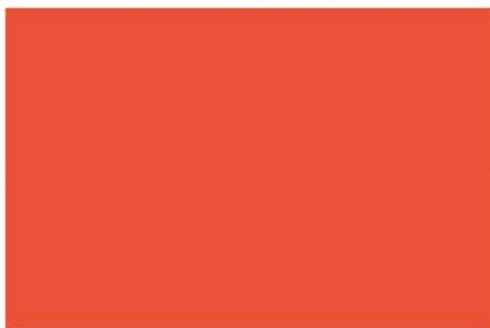




**ROSA
LUXEMBURG
STIFTUNG**
SOUTHEAST ASIA
HANOI OFFICE

SOUTHEASTERN PERSPECTIVES

Vol. 1 No. 08/2025

Muhammad Ridha

Indonesia's Revolt against Oligarchy

The uprising of 2025 might just be the beginning of further struggles

The protests that have flared up across Indonesia for some time reached a new crescendo in August 2025. Thousands took to the streets, both in Jakarta and other cities across the island archipelago, calling for social justice and institutional reform.

Indonesia's popular uprising began with a mobilization on 25 August in response to the government's decision to grant parliamentarians a housing allowance amounting to ten times the country's minimum wage — at a time when millions of citizens are struggling to cover basic expenses. Outrage grew when members of the House of Representatives (DPR), one of Indonesia's two elected legislative assemblies, danced at the annual session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), and one member, Ahmad Sahroni of the National Democratic Party (Nasdem), insulted the protestors by calling them "the world's biggest fools". Other members of the People's Representative Council, one of two chambers of the MPR, made similarly disparaging remarks. The blatant contrast between the tough economic reality facing everyday Indonesians and the arrogance of the

country's political class sparked a popular anger at state institutions that soon boiled over.

The revolt continued until 28 August. It began with a mobilization organized by the Labour Party (Partai Buruh) demanding higher wages, the abolition of outsourcing, and electoral reform, along with calls for the state to protect the interests of its own citizens. Soon, however, the wave of protests escalated, triggered by the tragic death of Affan Kurniawan, a 21-year-old motorcycle taxi driver run over by police during a clash. Affan's death came to symbolize state violence against the common people, further inflaming passions and bringing thousands more onto the streets.

The resistance to the current government is no longer limited to workers, but also includes professionals, students, and even delivery drivers. The revolt is not only directed at the House of

Representatives but also at the police, who are often the perpetrators of repressive violence against citizens. Thus far, however, it has failed to converge in a way that could threaten the powers-that-be.

The Uprising's Economic Roots

The fundamental reason why Indonesians are so angry is the dominance of wealthy oligarchs in the country's political system. Indonesian Corruption Watch (ICW) data indicate that for the 2024–2029 legislative term, 354 of the 580 members of the House of Representatives (approximately 61 percent) have a background as entrepreneurs or are affiliated with the business sector. This phenomenon has increased over time from 33.6 percent in 1999–2004 to 60–61 percent today.

What makes the most recent mass revolt particularly noteworthy is the ruling class's attempts at systematic repression.

The oligarchy's power over politics ensures that the state rarely acts in the public interest, but rather in the interests of the wealthy. The absolute number of unemployed people has increased under President Prabowo Subianto, reaching 7.28 million people by February 2025 — an increase of around 80,000 from the previous year. This is due to rampant layoffs and a lack of available jobs as a result of the government's failure to structurally transform and industrialize the Indonesian economy. At the same time, the number of Indonesian workers in the informal sector has now reached 86.58 million, accounting for 59.4 percent of the total working population.

The decline in public welfare under the current administration is not, however, merely a product of an

economic slump, but also the result of government spending policies. After taking office in October 2024, the Prabowo administration implemented austerity measures to address the previous government's excessive spending, particularly the relocation of the national capital to Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN), which had drained state resources and greatly increased debt. Critical social budgets such as education and healthcare were reduced, whereas spending on defence and police was increased.

From this budgeting pattern, it is clear that the Prabowo administration's attempts to tackle pre-existing structural problems are not designed to ensure social protection for its own citizens, but rather to strengthen the state's apparatus of violence. This signals government priorities: rather than seeking legitimacy through welfare provision, the government increasingly relies on coercion — a trajectory that often correlates with the consolidation of authoritarian rule

Cycles of Mobilization

The uprising in August cannot be separated from broader resistance to the oligarchy that has been brewing in the country for years. Starting in 2019, popular movements began pushing back against reforms launched by former president Joko Widodo (also known as Jokowi), including the 2019 student movement and the mass mobilization in 2020, when the people of Indonesia rejected the ratification of the so-called Omnibus Law on Job Creation, which abolished many workers' rights in the name of facilitating investment. Indeed, the enactment of the law became the impetus behind the founding of the aforementioned Labour Party in 2021.

Prior to August, there had been at least ten major mobilizations since

Prabowo took power, two of which are worth noting. The first was in February, when young people staged a protest themed “Indonesia Gelap” (Dark Indonesia). Many young protesters felt increasingly pessimistic about the future due to the government’s failure to provide protect citizens from the material fallout of its austerity policies. One of these was the Free Nutritious Meals programme, which was plagued by problems such as poor food quality and mass poisoning in several schools, despite being supported by funds amounting to 420 trillion Indonesian rupiahs (roughly 22 billion euro) per year, or 11 percent of the total state budget. Another mobilization followed in March, when the masses rejected the passing of a bill expanding the military’s role in the civilian sphere, which to many felt reminiscent of the Suharto dictatorship. Nevertheless, neither of these protests managed to pressure the government to change its policy.

Mobilizations also took place across Indonesia’s vast regions. On 13 August, the people of Pati, Central Java, staged a mass protest against plans to increase land tax rates by up to 250 percent, which they believed would stifle the community’s livelihood. Similar mass protests also occurred in Bone, South Sulawesi, where the local government planned to increase taxes by up to 300 percent. In other words, what the world saw in late August, while the most momentous, was only one sequence in a wave of protests that had been building up since 2019 due entirely to the state’s indifference to the welfare of the majority.

Building Collective Power

What makes the most recent mass revolt particularly noteworthy is the ruling class’s attempts at systematic repression. The Commission for Missing

Persons and Victims of Violence or KontraS, a human rights group, reported 602 occurrences of police violence against political dissenters between June 2024 and July 2025. These included killings without trial, torture, and unlawful arrests. State violence against protest movements has been a part of Indonesian politics for a long time, but the level and size of violence recorded during this time is far higher than in prior years, suggesting that the current administration is becoming more repressive.

To address this challenge, the Indonesian people must unite — not by erasing their differences, but by incorporating them into a broader struggle for justice, equality, and democracy.

Yet as protests escalated in August, Indonesia’s oligarchic ruling class expanded its response and sought to silence the movement by discrediting it and painting protesters as violent hooligans. Efforts to silence the protests through repression and intelligence operations proved successful in slowing down the mass mobilization. Angry citizens were no longer willing to take to the streets because they feared that the ruling class would manipulate their legitimate grievances. Renewed attempts at mobilization in early September saw lower numbers of participants, due largely to fear of riots. Middle-class activists, supported by social media influencers, symbolically submitted several demands to the House of Representatives, but the action has so far not yielded any concrete results.

This dynamic illustrates a fundamental paradox in contemporary Indonesian politics. On the one hand, it reveals deep social unrest caused by

policies of austerity and oligarchic consolidation. On the other hand, the absence of an organized movement means that popular outrage lacks a clear direction that could threaten the foundations of oligarchic power. Instead, it even ends up *strengthening* those foundations by bolstering the security apparatus's hold over society.

Fragmentation remains the greatest weakness of mass movements in Indonesia today: workers fight for their own sectoral economic demands, farmers defend their land in isolation, poor urban communities resist eviction at the local level, and students demonstrate on campuses, but rarely do these struggles converge into a unified front. What results is a cycle of resistance that is vibrant yet scattered, persistent yet fragile, heroic yet unable to consolidate gains.

To eliminate fragmentation, Indonesia's popular movements must recognize that no single sector, no matter how well-organized, can withstand the formidable alliance of oligarchs and political elites on its own. The fledgling Labour Party may offer a political vehicle, but if it is not grounded in the ongoing struggles of disfranchised youth, peasants, and informal workers, it could become just another minor party fishing for votes without the ability to bring about real change.

The unorganized individuals who are not yet members of a trade union or political party and those who resist in spontaneous or localized ways possess a vast amount of energy and inventiveness. It is not just desirable to connect this energy with the stability of ordered systems — it is imperative.

The lesson is clear: coming together makes movements stronger, while breaking apart makes them weaker. To address this challenge, the Indonesian people must unite — not by erasing their differences, but by

incorporating them into a broader struggle for justice, equality, and democracy. The August revolt represented the greatest demonstration yet of Indonesians' desire for meaningful change. That change may have been hindered this time, but the quest for more effective forms of resistance must begin — towards a framework that depends less on sudden outbursts but on the slow, patient work of building durable collective power.

Muhammad Ridha is Political Analyst and Activist and Head of Ideology and Cadre Development for the Indonesian Labour Party, Partai Buruh.

The article was first published on www.rosalux.de

Published on September 23, 2025, by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Hanoi Office

Imprint

South Eastern Perspectives

Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Hanoi Office

Hanoi, Vietnam

E-Mail: hanoi@rosalux.org

Website: <http://www.rosaluxhanoi.org>