

Green Jackets and Empty Wallets: Indonesia's Protests and the Politics of Inequality

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Summary

The 2025 protests in Indonesia represent a critical moment in the country's post-Reformasi political trajectory, driven by mounting public dissatisfaction with entrenched elites, widening economic inequality, and democratic backsliding. Triggered by economic hardship and elite excess, the protests rapidly evolved into a broad-based movement uniting students, civil society groups, and precarious gig workers. The escalation of unrest was catalysed by the death of Affan Kurniawan, a 21-year-old motorcycle taxi driver killed during a police crackdown, transforming diffuse grievances into collective outrage. Under President Prabowo Subianto, policies expanding military involvement in civilian governance, alongside persistent elite privilege, intensified fears of authoritarian regression. The stark contrast between lawmakers' lavish salaries and calls for fiscal restraint deepened perceptions of elite hypocrisy, while derogatory remarks by members of parliament further eroded public trust, fuelling violent confrontations and mass mobilisation. Gig workers, symbolised by their green jackets, emerged as a central force, embodying Indonesia's growing precariat characterised by insecurity, low wages, and limited social protection. Affan's death functioned as a critical-mass event that overcame coordination barriers, enabling cross-sectoral mobilisation. Ultimately, the protests reflect Hirschman's concept of "voice" in response to blocked economic exit and declining political loyalty, underscoring how inequality, elite indifference, and state repression can reshape political participation and expose both the fragility and resilience of Indonesia's democratic order.

Structural Grievances and the Origins of the 2025 Indonesian Protests

The 2025 Indonesian protests that swept across Indonesia can be described as the people's dissatisfaction with entrenched elites and worsening economic hardships. It illustrates an accumulation and convergence of various sectors of society, fighting against deep-rooted corruption and increasing economic inequality.

Since taking office, President Prabowo has accelerated policies that expand the role of the military in civilian institutions, raising fears of a return to Suharto-era oligarchic militarism and democratic regression (Astrina, 2025). A general once accused of human rights abuses, Prabowo rebranded himself to an embraceable grandfatherly figure, winning the 2024 election with 58% of the votes (Jakartapost, 2024).

Adding to this, is the stark contrast between economic hardship and lawmakers' lavish lifestyle. Lawmakers in Indonesia earn up to NZ\$10,490 a month, more than 30 times the average income, with housing allowances exceeding ten times Jakarta's minimum wage, at NZ\$5,170 a month (Siregar, 2025). Such benefits clash with Prabowo's calls

for fiscal restraint to fund populist programs like free school meals (Sambul, Salim, & Birtles, 2025), highlighting a disconnect between ruling elites and citizens.

Furthermore, the implementation of local tax hikes to fund the national budget, while maintaining high salaries for the 580 lawmakers further entrenches the dissonance between elites and citizens (Yuniar, 2025). This dissonance is further amplified when some MPs mocked demonstrators as the “dumbest people in the world,” while others made comparisons to “commoners.” These remarks, amplified by social media, reinforced public perceptions that ruling elites only serve themselves and their financiers, rather than constituents (INP, 2025). Consequently, demonstrations escalated into more violent clashes, as well as looting of MPs’ residences, and destruction of government property, bringing cities to a standstill (Renaldi, 2025).

The symbolism is potent: ordinary citizens suffering from inequality, confronting elites cocooned in wealth and shielded from everyday struggles of the people they were supposed to represent. All while the majority faces rising costs and limited opportunities.

State Repression and the Death of Affan Kurniawan

The demonstrations reached a critical juncture with the death of Affan Kurniawan, a 21-year-old motorcycle taxi driver killed by a police riot vehicle meant for counterterrorism. His death was the result of government’s brutal crackdown on protestors with Human Rights Watch describing it as excessive use of force (Human Rights Watch, 2025).

For many Indonesians, Affan became a martyr – an ordinary worker, a breadwinner struggling to survive and feed his family, to end up being crushed by state power. His death symbolizes the struggle against inequality and authoritarianism, galvanizing new groups into the protests. This transformed a movement led by student activists and civil society organisations into a mass uprising by various sectors of society, particularly fellow gig workers who stood in solidarity with Affan. Thousands of gig workers, especially Gojek and Grab drivers, joined the demonstrations en masse.

Their distinctive green motorcycle jackets became the most visible symbol of the protests. These workers represent Indonesia’s growing precariat—insecure, overworked, and underpaid labourers living without stable employment or adequate social protection. As Guy Standing argues, the “precariat” constitutes an expanding social class characterised by instability and limited prospects for upward mobility. In Indonesia, gig workers epitomise this condition (Standing, 2011).

Platforms such as Gojek, Grab, and other e-hailing services offer employment opportunities amid scarce formal jobs. Indonesia currently records the highest unemployment rate in the region, with more than seven million people unemployed (Ardian, 2025; Cho, 2025; Siwi & Kristianus, 2025). While approximately 24 million Indonesians live below the poverty line, an estimated four million now depend on the gig economy (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2025; Gigpedia, 2023), rendering it a critical yet highly vulnerable segment of society. Gig platforms thus provide alternative

revenue streams by transforming casual labour into livelihoods that many Indonesians rely upon in times of economic hardship.

Solidarity, Symbolism, and Collective Action Dynamics

Donning their green uniforms, mobilization of these gig workers marks a new stage in Indonesian protest history. Previously, gig workers organized sporadically for better pay and working conditions (Rayda et al., 2025). This latest protest however, they fused with students, activists, and civil society groups, broadening the movement's demands to encompass socioeconomic reform, accountability, and democratic renewal. The movement adopted a wider symbolism of solidarity and reform through the colours green and pink. On social media, the hashtag #bravepinkherogreen gained traction, with green symbolizing Affan's rideshare uniform and pink the civil society and women's groups opposing the government (Faturahman, 2025).

The protests also illuminate debates in political science about why large groups coalesced. Olson's Logic of Collective Action suggests that diffused groups rarely mobilize, yet Indonesia's protests demonstrate the opposite (Olson, 1974). Affan's death acted as a catalyst, and despite lacking central leadership, it created what scholars Oliver, Marwell, and Teixeira (Oliver, Marwell & Teixeira, 1985) describe as a "critical mass". Once participation crossed visibility thresholds, protests cascaded, drawing in students, gig workers, activists and marginalized groups.

Albert Hirschman's *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* also offers insight (Hirschman, 1970). Facing limited job prospects, gig workers were unable to "exit" precarious conditions and instead remained structurally constrained within them. Consequently, they exercised "voice" by joining protests to pressure the government for structural change, while "loyalty" to the political system eroded amid repression and elite arrogance. Viewed through a resource mobilisation lens, these dynamics illustrate how social movements seek to transform political structures by capitalising on critical, punctuating events.

Finally, Robert Salisbury's emphasis on expressive benefits of collective action applies here (Salisbury, 1969). For many, joining protests was not only about material gain, but also about publicly affirming values of justice, fairness, and accountability.

Protest Demands, State Response, and Political Consequences

The movement, now calling for transparency, reform and empathy posited "17+8" demands, combining short-term and long-term reforms (Kenawas, 2025). Key demands included ending military involvement in civilian life, halting salary and allowance increases for MPs, and establishing greater budget transparency (Kenawas, 2025). Calls for police accountability, especially for Affan's death, featured prominently.

Prabowo initially branded protestors as rioters and traitors, deploying security forces and the military in crackdowns. More than 3,000 people were detained, and police brutality fuelled further anger (Human Rights Watch, 2025). But as unrest escalated, the government conceded to some reforms. The parliament's housing allowance

increase was halted (Oktafian, 2025), several ministers were replaced (Aljazeera, 2025), MPs who mocked citizens were suspended, and police reforms were promised.

In an interview by BBC, scholar Vedi Hadiz notes that the the scale of and composition of these protests make them “among the most significant outbreak of protests since the advent of reformasi” (Butler, 2025). The convergence of students, civil society, and the new precariat – gig workers – illustrates how entrenched inequality and authorities’ indifference to public suffering can reshape political mobilization.

The protests demonstrate that Indonesia’s democratic future hinges on whether elites address the grievances of ordinary citizens rather than entrench their privileges. Although it remains uncertain whether this momentum can translate into lasting institutional change, the protests have already reshaped Indonesia’s political landscape, reminding us that ordinary citizens, when pushed to the margins, will find collective voice.

Conclusion

The 2025 Indonesian protests reveal how deepening inequality, elite detachment, and authoritarian drift can converge into powerful moments of collective mobilisation. What began as diffuse dissatisfaction crystallised around the potent symbolism of green jackets and empty wallets, capturing the lived realities of a growing precariat confronting entrenched privilege. Affan Kurniawan’s death served as a moral shock that transformed fragmented grievances into a broad-based movement uniting students, civil society, and gig workers. The protests challenge conventional assumptions about collective action, demonstrating how moral outrage, symbolism, and shared precarity can overcome coordination barriers. Politically, the unrest forced concessions and exposed the fragility of Indonesia’s post-reformasi democratic settlement. Yet the longer-term significance lies in what remains unresolved. Whether these mobilisations translate into durable institutional reform will depend on the willingness of political elites to address structural inequality, restrain militarisation, and restore public trust. Ultimately, the protests underscore a broader lesson: when democratic channels fail to respond to everyday hardship, marginalised citizens will find alternative ways to make their voices heard.

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