



Protesters stage a rally against a recent budget cut policy from the government, stating that it will negatively affect public administration and education, during an anti-government demonstration near the presidential palace in Jakarta, Indonesia, on 21 February 2025. (Photo by Eko Siswono Toyudho / ANADOLU / Anadolu via AFP)

## Shaping Indonesia's Democracy: Youth Alight Amidst #DarkIndonesia

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**Indonesia's youth protests today call to mind past cases of student activism in the quarter century of post-reform democracy since the fall of Suharto. Will history repeat itself?**

The [#IndonesiaGelap](#) (“Dark Indonesia”) protests have emerged as a political movement, led primarily by students and civil society activists opposing President Prabowo Subianto’s latest policy decisions. Demonstrators, dressed in black to symbolise their discontent, have repeatedly taken to the streets in multiple cities [across the archipelago](#).

At the core of the protests [is](#) strong opposition against Prabowo’s proposed budget cuts, amounting to approximately [US\\$19 billion](#). The government intends to reallocate these funds toward new policy initiatives but [protesters](#) argue that the cuts disproportionately impact essential sectors like education and healthcare. Public frustration has intensified due to the perceived lack of transparency in the government’s financial priorities, especially after revelations that the reallocated funds were mainly [directed toward financing Danantara](#), a new sovereign wealth fund.

Protesters also strongly oppose the growing military presence in civilian government roles. Tensions in Jakarta are high now that parliament’s government factions [are set to pass](#) a bill extending the retirement age and allowing military officers to serve in more ministries than was previously permitted under the 2004 version of the Indonesian Armed Forces (TNI) Law, among other changes. This bill [is scheduled](#) to be ratified in the plenary session in the Parliament this (20 March) morning. The recent protests underscore broad anxieties over growing living costs and poor governance, amidst shrinking democratic freedoms and economic instability. The [#DarkIndonesia protests “part two”](#) are starting today and are planned to continue through the weekend.

In recent months, the hashtag [#kaburajadulu](#) (“Just Flee First”) has gained traction, reflecting a growing pessimism about Indonesia’s future, resonating particularly with young urban Indonesians. Issues such as nepotism, corruption, and government mismanagement have fueled this sentiment. Earlier this year, the [movement](#) spilled onto the streets, [nationwide](#). In Jakarta, demonstrators gathered near the State Palace while protests erupted in Yogyakarta, Semarang, Surabaya, Medan, and nearly every major city across Java. The movement extended overseas, with members of the Indonesian diaspora staging demonstrations in [Australia](#) and [Germany](#).

Organised by the Student Executive Board–All Indonesia (BEM-SI), these protests are driven by unresolved dissatisfaction with predecessor Joko Widodo’s administration but also new anger against President Prabowo Subianto’s government. Demonstrators have put forward [13 demands addressing a range of issues](#), including education, military involvement in politics, austerity measures, asset confiscation laws, and police reform.

How has Prabowo’s government responded? More importantly, to what extent will these demonstrations impact the new government’s legitimacy and can they precipitate change?

The government firmly rejects the notion that Indonesia is in crisis and its response has been a mix of reassurances, dismissal, and selective engagement. On education funding, officials sought to reassure the public, [insisting](#) the budget cuts would not affect teacher salaries or essential education programmes. Government officials have remained largely disciplined in their public responses. Minister of State Secretariat Prasetyo Hadi was the designated spokesperson to directly address the demonstrators. He has [met with protesters](#) and [urged the public](#) to give Prabowo's administration a fair chance to govern.

**This youth-driven social movement, drawing in even high school students, has given new energy to democratic resistance.**

Prabowo has attempted to counter [this pessimism](#) with a message of optimism, questioning why young people perceived Indonesia as being in decline when economic forecasts predicted high growth. However, challenges for the government appear to be mounting as its rapid and sometimes unclear policy decisions have caused uncertainty or worry.

The market [jitters](#) earlier this week are a firm warning that Prabowo's margin for error might not be as wide as he believes. On 18 March, Indonesia's stock market plunged by over 7 per cent – to its lowest level since the pandemic – and a presidential spokesperson had to [reassure](#) the public that [rumours](#) that Minister of Finance Sri Mulyani would be stepping down amid a broader reshuffle were untrue, speculation that the minister herself also denied.

Against this backdrop, the “Dark Indonesia” protests evoke memories of two significant student-led movements in Indonesia's post-reform history, even if it is only an incipient movement now.

The more dramatic example is the 1998 student uprising that emerged during the severe economic crisis and political repression under Suharto's authoritarian rule. Unlike under Suharto, Prabowo's government is not (yet) using repression to stop the occasional violent protest from erupting. The second [successful case](#) of student activism was last August's “Emergency Warning” movement, a direct response to the Widodo clan's dynasticism and the Constitutional Court's annulment of the Supreme Court's ruling on lowering the age limits for regional head and deputy regional head electoral candidates.

The Supreme Court's ruling was widely seen as paving the way for Joko Widodo's youngest son to run for governor or deputy governor (which did not happen). The then Parliament's attempt to pass new regulations that would override the Constitutional Court's decision and reinstate the Supreme Court's ruling had ignited public outrage, sparking widespread demonstrations. The intensity of public dissent forced the DPR to postpone its ratification of the controversial amendments, underscoring the power of civic engagement in shaping legislative decisions.

The trajectory of the #DarkIndonesia protests has yet to coalesce around a singular goal like regime change. However, the growing scale and stubborn persistence of the movement suggest that public dissatisfaction is mounting. If the government fails to address grievances and convincingly shift the public narrative with actual policy success, further unrest [could destabilise the administration](#), forcing policy reversals or more ministerial reshuffles.

The confluence of widespread economic and social grievances this early into the new administration's term suggests that sustained pressure from civil society could lead to meaningful change. This youth-driven social movement, drawing in even high school students, has given new energy to democratic resistance. Today's young activists recognise that while social media provides a space for dissent, real impact requires physical mobilisation through protests and demonstrations.

These protests are an echo of Indonesia's tumultuous political history and the enduring power of student activism. Whether they will catalyse change or fade into history is uncertain but what is clear is that Indonesia's youth and civil society remain vigilant, continuing to shape the nation's democratic evolution.

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