

# **The Bloody Protests in Indonesia and Their Root Causes**

(Translated)

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Since 25 August, 2025, Indonesia has been witnessing a wave of large-scale mass demonstrations recorded in 107 locations across 32 provinces. While some protests remained peaceful, many escalated into riots involving vandalism and arson. Several regions saw the most severe unrest, including the capital Jakarta, Central Java, East Java, West Java, Yogyakarta, North Sumatra, West Nusa Tenggara, South Sulawesi, and West Kalimantan. Public facilities, government offices, and even national security assets suffered severe damage. In Jakarta, for example, 22 TransJakarta bus and MRT subway stations were vandalized, with losses estimated at around 50.4 billion Indonesian rupiah.

In Makassar, South Sulawesi, the regional and municipal legislative council (DPRD) buildings were burned, resulting in three deaths and five injuries. Similar riots erupted in other cities, targeting legislative offices, local government headquarters, police stations, museums, officials' residences, and public facilities such as street lighting, CCTV cameras, and transportation infrastructure, all of which suffered extensive damage. Alongside the destruction of vital infrastructure, these disturbances claimed innocent lives and caused losses estimated at tens to hundreds of billions of rupiah for the state.

The first protests broke out between August 10 and 13 in Pati, Central Java, triggered by a proposal to raise land and building taxes (PBB-P2) by up to 250%. Tax hikes also occurred in other areas, reaching as high as 1000% in Cirebon. These increases resulted from the 2025-2026 regional budget cuts imposed by President Prabowo Subianto, amounting to USD 234 billion, which reduced provincial funds by a quarter to only USD 40 billion, the lowest in a decade. This forced local governments to increase property and land taxes. At the same time, defense spending rose by 37%, and the free meal program nearly doubled to USD 20.5 billion.

Shortly after, between August 15 and 20, protests spread to Jakarta, focusing on the lavish privileges of parliament members, particularly the monthly housing allowance of 50 million rupiah (about USD 3,000), which is ten times the minimum wage in the capital.

By August 25, protests had reached major cities such as Bandung, Makassar, Medan, and Bali, with demands ranging from repealing elite-friendly policies to dissolving the parliament (DPR). Public anger intensified after provocative remarks by certain legislators, including labeling critics as "the dumbest people in the world," which further fueled outrage. On August 28, thousands of demonstrators, students, workers, and app-based motorcycle taxi drivers, clashed with security forces in front of the parliament building in Jakarta, demanding labor reforms, the abolition of outsourcing, and an increase in the minimum wage.

A tragic incident occurred when a motorcycle taxi driver, Affan Kurniawan, was killed after being struck by a police tactical vehicle on the night of August 28. His death triggered widespread outrage and inflamed unrest in other cities.

The protests in Indonesia are not merely about high taxes and lawmakers' lavish perks, but reflect an accumulation of public anger over the state's chronic failure to meet the aspirations of its people, whether under past administrations, or within less than a year of President Prabowo's rule, particularly in the economic sphere, as well as the political elite's lack of empathy for the people's suffering.

According to World Bank data from 2023, around 60% of Indonesia's workforce still depend on the informal sector, without fixed income or social protection. Matters worsened with the shrinking of the middle class, as millions slipped into lower income brackets, or fell back into poverty.

Data from the Center of Economic and Law Studies (CELIOS) shows that about 10 million Indonesians experienced economic decline over the past five years. At the same time, food prices rose, job opportunities shrank, and more than 42,000 workers were laid off since early 2025. Amid the economic crisis, the government imposed steep tax hikes and added new fees on public transactions. When it failed to meet its revenue targets due to slow growth and rising debt, it resorted to budget cuts and diverting funds to large-scale priority projects. Meanwhile, lawmakers' allowances were raised.

In the midst of people's suffering, a video circulated on social media showing lawmakers dancing during the annual parliamentary session in August, right after the announcement of the housing allowance increase.

In reality, Indonesia is a country with immense natural resource potential. It ranks first globally in tin and nickel production, third in coal, and sixth in gold. Yet most of these resources are controlled by the private sector, both domestic and foreign. For instance, China controls about 75% of Indonesia's nickel shares.

Practically, most state revenue comes from taxes, which account for over 80% of total income. This means that natural resource revenues contribute less than 20%, shared with other state-owned assets.

This extensive private control over strategic national assets has widened the gap in social justice. Whenever the state faces a budget deficit, the government's only recourse is to impose more taxes and fees on the people. This cycle has driven citizens into greater hardship and anger.

Unfortunately, the demands raised by protesters and rioters have remained largely superficial, focusing on repealing lawmakers' housing allowance. Yet the real roots of the problem lie in the country's political-economic structure, built on capitalism.

Economically, the principle of absolute private ownership enables capitalists and oligarchs to control strategic national resources. Politically, through the democratic system, they safeguard their economic interests whether through elections, lobbying groups, or corrupt practices such as bribery.