

Indonesian Riots: The Changes Which (Still) Locked?

The tragedy of Affan Kurniawan, an Indonesian online motorcycle taxi driver who was killed after being run over by a police barracuda car on August 28, 2025, culminated in a series of demonstrations in dozens of cities across Indonesia. This article is not intended to answer questions, but rather to raise questions for anyone claiming to be an Islamic activist.

Embers of Inequality in Metropolitan Jakarta

Affan Kurniawan's death has highlighted the disparities in life in Jakarta, one of Southeast Asia's largest cities. A junior high school dropout, Affan lived in a 3x11 meter rented house with his seven family members in an area known as the "old money" area. He survived by eking out a living as an online motorcycle taxi driver, a profession at the bottom of the urban informal economy, representing a caste of urban poor who survive in the squalid narrow street between Jakarta's grand and aesthetically pleasing buildings.

Not only that, but the iconic figure of the pink-veiled mother who received praise for her courage in facing the authorities in the thick of the demonstration also came into focus. The pink-veiled mother stood proudly at the forefront of the protesters, shouting with the angry curses typical of Jakarta's suburbanites, while carrying a bamboo pole with a red and white flag. She reflected the poor urban mothers who were disturbed by the luxurious lives of DPR officials who were rolling in allowances.

Jakarta's disparate face is a reflection of how capitalist development has worked in this country for nearly eight decades. Ironically, during those decades, Jakarta has consistently been a magnet for urbanization, the primary reason for job seekers to seek a livelihood. However, various studies have revealed that the sharpest social fragmentation occurs in Central Jakarta and the most *well-developed urban areas*. A hallmark of capitalism.

Fire doesn't burn without embers. There's a systemic issue here, not just a partial one. Like dry, flammable straw, the people's suffering is easily ignited. It only takes a little push to ignite. The increase in property tax (PBB) for people in various regions, mass layoffs in the manufacturing sector, coupled with the controversy over the increase in allowances for members of the House of Representatives (DPR), is then spiced up by various *tone-deaf comments* and lack of empathy from hedonistic members of the House, many of whom are incompetent celebrities. Boom!!! It explodes like a time bomb.

The Exposure of Elite Factionalism by the Youth Movement

Dahlan Iskan, a senior Indonesian journalist, wrote that there was something unique about the pattern of the August 25-28 demonstrations. The movement developed without command, with many calls but no institutions, many ripples but no coordinators. The commanders were predominantly drawn from social media. Demonstration invitations circulated through social media. Through calls. Without mentioning who issued the calls. They were simply swallowed. Those who read the call didn't check who it was from. They probably just felt it fit—moved to join the demonstration. They gathered at a predetermined point. From there, they moved to their targets. From demonstrations to even looting of the homes of members of Parliament.

As ANU researcher Edward Aspinall has argued, the recent protests can be understood as the result of a clash between two worlds of Indonesian politics: the official representative political world and the creative youth subculture that rejects it. The youth protest movement, propelled by social media, centers on a deep antipathy toward Indonesia's ruling elite. Social media permeates and unites a growing network of loose organizations, as well as connections between more established institutions. This movement is ideologically diverse—but united by the common thread of resistance to oligarchy, anger at the corruption of the ruling elite, and rejection of growing economic inequality.

This youth movement is adept at reading the elite's power play, where not everyone is astute in detecting their tactical play. From an elite political perspective, factionalism is undeniably present within the Prabowo administration. Ripples of rift and conflict between the Prabowo and Jokowi camps (represented by Gibran as vice president) have been apparent in recent months. Indications of the heating up of relations between Parok and Parjo on the demonstration grounds - show an invisible muscle battle intensifying, the elites playing pawns on a chessboard, with Parok and Parjo as their tactical playthings, but the people are always on the sidelines and merely objects to be exploited. The game of creating conditions on the ground is getting more heated as one camp tries to play with fire by exploiting public anger, but is starting to get burned by the fire it has sparked itself.

Elite factionalism and their competing interests were easily detected by the youth movement, which smelled the stench of deploying buzzers to create conditions for anarchic looting, which in fact did not stem from the aspirations of the people themselves. Consequently, the damage to the reputation of the House of Representatives (DPR) and the credibility of the Indonesian National Police (Polri) left both camps locked in a vicious cycle, constantly attempting to lock each other out. Meanwhile, the youth movement, with its demands for 17+8, lacked a systemic solution or a clear direction for change, remaining focused on partial changes and institutional reforms within the DPR, Polri, and TNI in an 'old tone' secular democratic framework.

The question is, can the interlocking elite maneuvers, coupled with the push for the 17+8 agenda by the youth movement, open the door to change for this country? Or will it instead return to the same cycle as in 1998, namely a change in regime power without a change in the system of life?

More fundamentally, there's a more intriguing question: in this largest Muslim country, where are the voices of Islamic activists? Where are the voices of the young people who loudly advocated for comprehensive Islam as a counter-solution? Where are the preachers who dared to debate every aspect of public discourse, such as police reform, representative politics, economic development, mining, and even urban politics?

Yes, they have long been silenced by the elite in power, but now is the time to ask ourselves whether we are truly silenced or have we become accustomed to being silenced?

**Written for the Central Media Office of Hizb ut Tahrir by
Dr. Fika Komara**