

Rethinking democracy and public ethics in Indonesia

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His death, tragic and avoidable, has become a symbol of the fragility of our democracy and the urgency of ethical reform in public life.

Plato once warned, "The price good men pay for indifference to public affairs is to be ruled by evil men."

Affan's death is not merely a procedural failure; it is a moral wake-up call. It forces us to ask: What kind of democracy are we building, and for whom?

The nationwide protests that erupted in August were not spontaneous. They were the culmination of long-standing grievances: stagnant wages, exploitative labor systems, opaque tax policies and a growing sense that the political elite has lost touch with the people they claim to represent.

Led by labor unions, student groups and civil society organizations, the demonstrations demanded the abolition of outsourcing, fair minimum wage increases, tax reforms and the ratification of long-delayed legislation, such as the Domestic Workers Protection Bill and the Asset Recovery Bill.

Yet as Reinhold Niebuhr once noted: "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."

The protests, while legitimate, also revealed vulnerabilities. In several cities, peaceful marches devolved into chaos, provoked by actors with unclear motives. Public buildings were burned, police injured and communities traumatized.

This duality between aspiration and agitation reminds us that democracy is not self-sustaining. It requires constant care, ethical leadership and civic maturity.

The official response to Affan's death was swift. President Prabowo Subianto visited Affan's family to express condolences. The police issued an apology and promised an investigation.

But apologies, however sincere, are insufficient without systemic change.

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AFP/Yasuyoshi Chiba

Up in arms: A helmeted man wearing the jacket of on-demand transportation and delivery services company Grab stands with his fists in the air during a protest at the Central Jakarta headquarters of the Jakarta Police's Mobile Brigade (Brimob) on Friday, a day after gig driver Affan Kurniawan was killed by a Brimob tactical vehicle.



By Bernardus Agus Rukiyanto

Yogyakarta

An associate professor at Šanata Dharma University

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We must ask: Why was a civilian killed in a democratic protest? Why was a tactical vehicle deployed in a civilian zone? Why was there no protocol to prevent such a tragedy?

These questions demand answers, not just for Affan's family, but for every citizen who believes in the promise of a just republic.

The protests also exposed a crisis of representation. While thousands marched on the streets, several members of the House of Representatives were on official visits abroad, drawing sharp criticism from civil society. Lawmakers' perceived disconnect from the people they represent has fueled calls for reform, including demands to reduce legislative privileges and increase transparency.

As Hannah Arendt observed, "Power arises when people act together." The legitimacy of democratic institutions depends not on their titles, but on their responsiveness. When citizens feel unheard, they will seek alternative avenues, sometimes outside the bounds of formal politics.

Indonesia's founding statesmen understood this well. Mohammad Hatta once wrote: "Democracy may be temporary,

ily suppressed by its own mistakes, but after bitter trials, it will rise again with renewed awareness." His words remind us that democratic renewal is possible, but only if we learn from our failures.

Sutan Sjahri, another architect of the nation's early democracy, emphasized that "moral integrity must stand above legal formality". In today's context, this means public officials must embody ethical leadership, not just procedural compliance.

If Indonesia is to move from mourning to meaning, we must embrace a road map for democratic renewal.

First, reform political representation. The House must become a space of service, not privilege. This requires revisiting compensation structures, enforcing attendance and accountability and creating mechanisms for direct citizen engagement.

Second, revitalize civic education. Democracy is not inherited; it is learned. Schools must teach not only procedures but also values: empathy, critical thinking and ethical leadership. Ki Hadjar Dewantara's timeless principle of "*Tut wuri handayani*", or giving encouragement from behind, reminds us that true leadership empowers others by propelling them forward.

Third, humanize security protocols. Security forces must be trained in nonviolent crowd management, de-escalation

techniques and human rights. A strong state is one that protects without provoking.

Fourth, strengthen media literacy and public dialogue. In the age of misinformation, citizens must be equipped to discern truth from manipulation. Public media should foster dialogue, not division. Søren Kierkegaard wrote: "Truth is not the possession of the majority, but of the one who dares to speak it."

Fifth, embed cultural wisdom in governance. Indonesia's rich philosophical heritage, from Pancasila to local *adat* (customs), offers a reservoir of ethical guidance. These values must inform policy, not just ceremonial rhetoric.

Affan's death must not be reduced to a statistic; it must become a turning point. A democracy that cannot protect its most vulnerable is a democracy in crisis. But a democracy that can learn, reform and renew itself is a democracy worth fighting for.

We must move beyond reactive politics toward reflective governance. We must cultivate leaders who listen, citizens who care and institutions that serve. To paraphrase Plato, a state that does not educate its citizens is like a ship without a captain.

Indonesia stands at a crossroads. The path forward is not paved with slogans, but with sincerity; not with power, but with principle; not with fear, but with faith in each other and in the values that bind us.

Let Affan's memory be a light: one of awakening, not anger. Let it guide us toward a democracy that is not just procedural, but substantive.

EDITORIAL

Not a '98 repeat

Indonesia is living through one of its most volatile moments since the democratic transition of 1998. What began as scattered unrest has now spilled across cities, fueled by deep economic frustration, perceived elite impunity and a rising sense that the political class has grown deaf to the people's plight.

This is President Prabowo Subianto's biggest test yet, not only of his leadership, but of his fidelity to the democratic values hard-earned through Reformasi.

To his credit, the President's address on Sunday struck several correct notes. He pledged respect for peaceful protest, cited international human rights conventions and openly condemned excessive police force.

He also offered something rare in Indonesian politics: accountability. Under pressure, major parties have rebuked or apologized for controversial statements by lawmakers, revoked some legislative privileges and promised a moratorium on wasteful overseas junkets.

But the stringing together of words, no matter how well-delivered or coordinated with political party leaders, is not enough.

The President must realize that this crisis will not be defused with symbolic gestures or public relations maneuvering.

If his administration is serious about earning public trust, the reckoning must start from the top.

The National Police, under Gen. Listyo Sigit Prabowo, has faced repeated accusations of disproportionate force.

Promising internal investigations is a first step, but without immediate, transparent and public consequences, these probes risk being seen as stalling tactics.

The President must consider the dismissal of top leadership as a signal of serious intent.

Just as importantly, the President must avoid falling back on familiar instincts of repression.

His speech carefully walked a line between affirming civil liberties and warning against anarchy, but some phrases, such as labeling protesters as potentially committing "treason" or "terrorism", echo dangerous historical precedents.

Already, there are reports of arbitrary arrests, the banning of live TikTok streams and excessive troop mobilizations. Both the government and the people cannot afford to resurrect the ghosts of the past under the pretext of order.

The challenge now is not just to restore calm, but to understand why the calm was broken in the first place.

Austerity measures, poorly communicated state programs and a disconnect between economic policy and real household pain have pushed ordinary Indonesians to the brink.

For years, citizens have watched lawmakers flaunt wealth, defend inflated allowances and sidestep accountability while wages stagnated and basic services deteriorated.

Prabowo must now do more than manage a crisis. He must show he understands its roots.

This means demanding not just public apologies, but real structural reform: slashing elite entitlements, overhauling communication between national and regional governments and ensuring that economic policies reflect the daily realities of the most impoverished of his fellow Indonesians.

Likewise, we call on all members of the political class, particularly those in elected office, to fulfill their duty to represent and not inflame.

Constituents in regions hit hardest by unrest deserve more than silence or platitudes. They deserve their representatives to act as mediators, defenders and listeners. That means visiting affected areas, calling for calm with credibility and ensuring that local voices are heard at the national level.

The timing of this unrest could not be more telling. Just weeks ago, Indonesia celebrated the 80th anniversary of independence and listened to Prabowo's maiden state address. It was supposed to be a moment of shared spirit, of national unity. Instead, the public now sees a deep rift between the promises of leadership and the realities on the ground.

President Prabowo still has a chance to close that gap; not with force, but with fairness. This means protecting peaceful protest, punishing violent actors without prejudice—especially if they are proven to be engineered—and putting people, not power, at the center of policymaking.

Let this not be a repeat of 1998. Let this be the beginning of a leadership marked by courage, humility and responsibility to reach a mature democracy.

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Boiling point of rage: Mr. President, act now!

When a country is rocked by major unrest, we are often tempted to see it as a spontaneous explosion of momentary anger. However, for sociologists and political experts, every mass upheaval is the result of an accumulation of long-held dissatisfaction.

The tragedy that befell Affan Kurniawan, an online motorcycle taxi driver (ojol) who died after being run over by an armored tactical vehicle belonging to the Jakarta Police's Mobile Brigade (Brimob) on Thursday, is a perfect example of this phenomenon. This single event, which occurred during a demonstration, was not the cause but the "boiling point" that ignited the collective rage. This tragic event created a sense of momentum and gave people a reason to finally take to the streets, after previously feeling powerless or afraid to act.

The world has witnessed a recurring pattern, where a tragic event affecting a single innocent individual can trigger an unexpected explosion of collective anger. In the United States, the killing of George Floyd sparked a wave of massive protests that exposed systemic racism. In France, the shooting of Nahel Merzouk ignited riots that highlighted issues of discrimination. In Iran, the death of Mahsa Amini sparked massive demonstrations demanding freedom.

The recent upheaval is not a sudden burst of anger but a consequence of the accumulation of various problems.

Over the last three months, public anger has increased significantly, driven by, first, a real economic disparity. The rise in



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prices of basic necessities and stagnant wages have triggered feelings of deprivation among the people. The stark contrast with the issue of increased allowances and salaries for members of the legislature only reinforces the perception that the elites no longer care.

Second, controversial policies and revision of laws, both in substance and process, such as the Indonesia Military (TNI) Law, the Criminal Law Procedure Code (KUHP) bill and the Coal and Mineral Law, have triggered public distrust in the country's political direction.

Third, a crisis of trust in law enforcement. The continuous violence committed by security forces during demonstrations has eroded the narrative that they are the protectors of the people.

The death of Affan has become the perfect symbol of all these injustices. This tragedy has convinced the people that there is no longer any guarantee of safety for anyone.

To quell this situation, President Prabowo Subianto must take the right and careful steps, learning from bitter past experiences.

One important lesson comes from the case of internet blocking during the violence and riots in Papua in 2019. At that time, the government tried to calm the riots by restricting internet

connections, but this measure was deemed an unlawful act by the Jakarta State Administration

Court (PTUN). The PTUN's decision proved that, even in a crisis situation, the state cannot sacrifice the basic rights of its citizens in the name of stability. Unaccountable and unlawful policies, such as internet blocking, will only trigger more lawsuits and a deeper crisis of trust.

The President must avoid unilateral actions that could erode the government's legitimacy and backfire later.

We can also learn from the 1998 riots. Both in 1998 and now, the explosion of anger did not happen suddenly. Both were preceded by an accumulation of public frustration. Both then and now, institutions have become targets because they are perceived to have lost public trust.

The people feel that these institutions no longer represent or protect their interests.

In both periods, there is a deep distrust of the ruling institutions. Security forces, TNI in 1998 and the police now, have become the main symbols of state-sponsored violence and injustice. There are also symbolic events, deaths that become the catalyst. In 1998, a main demand was accountability

practices of corruption, collusion and nepotism (KKN). Now, the demand is for accountability for the violence against civilians and legal injustice.

However, there are differences between the periods. In 1998, the target and source of anger was the entire regime and the political system that had been in power for 32 years. The demand was for "total reform," meaning replacing the entire power structure, including the top leadership. Whereas now, the target is more specific, namely the reform of institutions, such as the police, the TNI, the cabinet and the House of Representatives, which are considered the problem.

The main demand is not to replace the system but to fix it immediately.

President Prabowo must take quick, appropriate and firm steps in the coming days. A strong signal to calm the situation and restore public trust. A strong signal to the President and all his officials are with the people.

First, the President must immediately appear before the public and express deep condolences to the families of the victims of the violence that occurred in the capital and several regions in Indonesia. An open acknowledgment of the mistakes made on the ground is key.

Second, a direct order must be given to the National Police chief to investigate this case transparently and thoroughly. The perpetrators must be processed in a general court, not just an internal one. As in cases in other countries, the officials or top leaders of the related institutions should resign. This is a strong signal and a good example for the future so that officials and leaders are held accountable for their duties and restore public trust.

The President also needs to instruct the coordinating political, legal and security affairs minister and related ministries to continuously coordinate with

both the central and regional governments to de-escalate the riots, form an independent joint fact-finding team involving elements of society and the government whose members are considered credible by the public, instruct the home affairs minister to coordinate with the Regional Leadership Coordination Forum (Forkompida) to find solutions to regional problems, especially policies that burden the community, such as reckless tax implementation.

Third, the President needs to immediately open direct communication channels with representatives of online motorcycle taxi drivers, students and the community. The President's action of visiting Affan's family is a very good first step. Now, that step must be followed by a substantive dialogue. In addition, the President must instruct the coordinating economy minister and related ministries to immediately provide both medical and non-medical assistance to all victims of the widespread riots.

The President has to instruct all ministries and agencies to live a simple lifestyle and be more empathetic to the plight of the people who are living in hardship. Avoid arrogant and controversial statements or attitudes that can hurt the public's feelings.

These steps, although tactical and short-term, will send a strong message to the people: The government is on their side. Failure to act now will carry a far greater risk than just riots, namely the permanent loss of the people's trust in the state.

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Still bold, fiercely independent

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At 81, DJ Gloria fills
Sweden's dance floors

Businesses on edge about political stability as protests turn chaotic

Deni Ghifari

The Jakarta Post/Jakarta

Foreign businesses in Indonesia have expressed concern that widespread chaotic protests may be a telltale sign of political instability.

"I am very worried about the death that occurred [on Thursday] in such a difficult economic situation. I hope the Indonesian government will respond appropriately and make all efforts to ensure that the situation does not worsen," Lee Kang Hyun, chairman of the Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Indonesia (KoCham), told *The Jakarta Post* on Friday.

Lee was referring to the death of Affan Kurniawan, an *ojol* (online bike-hailing service) driver who was run over by an armored tactical vehicle of the National Police's Mobile Brigade (Brimob) during a protest on Thursday night.

Asked on Sunday whether the protests were a sign of political instability, Lee said, "of course" and added that he "desperately" hoped for the government and protesters to have a "sincere dialogue and regain stability as

soon as possible."

The protests began on Aug. 25 when a crowd, including many high schoolers still in their white-grey uniforms, flooded the area around the Senayan legislative complex to protest against an exorbitant pay hike for lawmakers.

More protests followed on Thursday, mobilized mainly by labor unions but joined by a myriad of *ojol* drivers. Amid a chaotic scene, Affan, who reportedly had not joined the protests but had just completed a food delivery, fell over in the middle of a Central Jakarta road, before a Brimob vehicle ran over him, all caught in multiple videos widely circulated online.

Dozens of people, reportedly went after the vehicle as it sped away, and that evening, the mob circled the Brimob headquarters in Kwiwang, Central Jakarta, with chaos erupting in the vicinity, particularly in the Pasar Senen area.

Affan's death angered people all over the country, and students rallied other groups to stage protests against the police in several big cities on Friday.

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Reuters/Willy Kumawan

On the prowl: A police tactical vehicle drives past the Jakarta city center on Sunday amid widespread anti-government protests and rioting over issues such as extra pay for lawmakers and housing allowances led by student groups that devolved into rioting.

Prabowo calls for severe response to protests

Police and military present in cities across country

Dio Suhenda and Verica Lai

The Jakarta Post/Jakarta

While President Prabowo Subianto on Sunday announced big concessions to roll back some legislative perks that incensed public opinion, he also instructed authorities to crack down on "treasonous" and "terrorist" elements in an attempt to diffuse the nation's worst bout of rioting in years.

Public frustration over tone-deaf lawmakers and their high remuneration, as well as the tragic killing of a young man by an armored police vehicle, has boiled over into the streets over the weekend as rioting spread to some of the country's biggest cities.

To address the crisis, Prabowo convened with leadership of the legislative bodies and leaders of all eight political parties in the House of Representatives, including the only de facto opposition the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), on Sunday at the State Palace.

Speaking in a press conference after the meeting, the President said that lawmakers would revoke their allowance policy and "suspend overseas work trips" in response to demands from protesters.

"Genuine aspirations and the right to peaceful assembly must be respected and protected. However, we cannot deny that there have been signs of unlawful actions, with some veering toward treason and terrorism," he said.



NFP/Agung Chandra

United front: President Prabowo Subianto (third left) reacts as he speaks on Sunday about a recent wave of nationwide protests during a press conference alongside political party leaders at the Presidential Palace in Jakarta. Prabowo spoke out against protests over economic conditions and inequality, saying some actions in rallies that have spread across the country in recent days amounted to treason and terrorism.

The President said he had instructed the National Police and the Indonesian Military (TNI) to take "the firmest actions possible in accordance with the law" against the destruction of public facilities and looting of property. At the same time, he urged citizens to channel their grievances peacefully, assuring that their voices would be "heard, noted and acted upon" by both the government and the legislature.

"Trust the government and remain calm. The government I lead, [which] together with all

political parties, including those outside my administration, is determined to always uphold the interests of the people and the nation," he added.

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Secret trail



AFP/Chasdee Mahyudin

A runner maneuvers past a tree on Sunday while participating in the Lhoknga Trail Run 2025, crossing a former guerrilla route and along the 2004 tsunami-affected coastline in Lhoknga, Aceh.

Putin and Modi in China for summit hosted by Xi

Isabel Kua

Agence France-Presse/Tianjin, China
Chinese President Xi Jinping gathered the leaders of Russia and India among dignitaries from around 20 Eurasian countries on Sunday for a showpiece summit aimed at putting China front and center of regional relations.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit is being held in the northern port city of Tianjin until Monday, days before a massive military parade in the capital Beijing to mark 80 years since the end of World War II.

The SCO comprises China, India, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Belarus, with 16 more countries affiliated as observers or "dialogue partners."

Russian President Vladimir Putin touched down in Tianjin on Sunday with an entourage of senior politicians and business representatives.

Meanwhile Xi held a flurry of bilateral meetings with leaders from the Maldives, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan and one of Putin's staunch allies, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Xi also met India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Sunday, who arrived the evening before, in his first visit to China since 2018.

Modi told Xi that India was committed to taking "forward our ties on the basis of mutual

trust, dignity and sensitivity," according to a video the Indian leader posted on X.

The two most populous nations are intense rivals competing for influence across South Asia and fought a deadly border clash in 2020.

A thaw began last October, when Modi met with Xi for the first time in five years at a summit in Russia.

"The interests of 2.8 billion people of both countries are linked to our cooperation. This will also pave the way for the welfare of the entire humanity," Modi told Xi.

'Project influence'

The bilateral talks were held at the Tianjin Guest House, an intimate venue surrounded by lush greenery.

Security guards positioned themselves around and inside the venue, their eyes scanning reporters and guests carefully, as Chinese diplomats hurried through the halls.

Large sections of Tianjin were closed to traffic, with a significant police presence deployed around the city.

Official posters promoting the SCO lined the streets, displaying words such as "mutual benefit" and "equality" written in Chinese and Russian.

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Officials' homes, DPRD offices damaged during protests

Maretha Uli, Genbong Hanung and Dio Suhenda

The Jakarta Post/Jakarta

Several houses of state officials and House of Representatives lawmakers as well as police stations and public facilities were damaged during protests unfolding in Jakarta and other regions across the country in the past few days, with at least three people killed during an escalated rally.

The unrest began in Jakarta earlier last week over lawmakers' lavish housing allowance, but escalated into a broader outcry against police brutality in the capital as well as other cities after the death of Affan Kurni-

awan, 21, an on-demand motorcycle driver who was killed by a tactical police vehicle during a protest on Thursday night.

On Saturday, a group of people turned their anger toward NasDem Party, who had drawn criticisms on social media for describing netizens urging the dissolution of the House as "the dumbest people in the world."

Videos circulating on social media showed hundreds of people breaking into his home in Saturday afternoon, looting furniture, electronics and luxury items, including a designer watch and a life-size action figure.

Sahroni does not appear in the footage, while unverified speculation on social media allege he had gone abroad a day earlier.

Later on Saturday, some users began sharing the home addresses of National Mandate Party (PAN) lawmakers Surya "Uya Kuya" Utama and Eko "Patrio" Hendro Purnomo and NasDem's Nafa Urbach, all of whom had similarly courted public controversy in recent days.

All three celebrities-turned-lawmakers apologized in video messages posted on Saturday night, but these did not quell the rising anger directed against them. That very evening, crowds of people forced their way into Uya's

home in Duren Sawit, East Jakarta, as well as Eko's home in Kuningan, South Jakarta, according to publicly available footage. Some people were seen fleeing with a sofa and electronic goods from Eko's house, Antara reported.

Jakarta Police spokesperson Sr. Comr. Ade Ary told *The Jakarta Post* on Sunday that the police are currently investigating the break-ins.

In the early hours on Sunday morning, looters allegedly broke into Nafa's house in the upscale neighborhood of Bintaro in South Tangerang, Banten, according to *Tribunnews.com*.

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