

Emergency Activism: Indonesia's Eroding Democracy, Activist Students, and the Art of Protest. An Interview With Frans Ari Prasetyo

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On 22 August 2024, thousands of students took to the streets of Indonesia's larger cities to protest against the Legislative Body's proposed revisions of the Regional Election Law (UU Pilkada) that would, as protesters argue, only serve the continuation of power of Indonesia's ruling elite. On social media, the hashtag #TolakPolitikDinasti went viral.

The protests, and particularly the state's response towards protesters, reignite memories of the 1998 student movement, that succeeded in ending the 32-years-long authoritarian regime and marked the beginning of a transition towards full democracy (Aspinall, 2020). However, this achievement, just as Indonesia's democracy, is gradually fading, and for commentators, it only seems natural that the force of the student movement is regaining power.

In a column for the national newspaper Kompas' website, appraising students' natural inclination towards justice, Indonesian sociologist Jannus Siahaan (2024) writes a day after the nation-wide demonstrations: "Welcome back students and common sense. Indonesia, the country we love, has already been missing you." But is it really true that students have been absent from the political field in the past two decades? Who is the "political vanguard" (Sastramijaja, 2019), now raging on the streets?

Frans Ari Prasetyo, an independent researcher, photographer, and activist himself was at the site of the protests in Bandung, West Java. In this interview, he reflects on Indonesia's current political situation, the protesters' grievances, but most importantly also the new dynamics in Indonesia's cultures of protest. This interview was adapted from an email correspondence that took place in the days following the August 2024 protests. Prasetyo's photographs, which he took during the protests in an act of documentation and that accompany this interview, take us right into the center of the events.

Keywords: Bandung; Indonesia; *Peringatan Darurat*; Social Media; Student Protests





DAYANA LENGAUER: *Frans, can you describe the events that took place on 22 August 2024 and the following days?*

FRANS ARI PRASETYO: After the “Emergency Warning” (*Peringatan Darurat*) poster/video emerged on social media on 21 August 2024, there was a great deal of news from the mainstream media about an attempt by the House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*, DPR) to change the Regional Elections Law. This was presented as a sudden attempt to benefit President Jokowi’s family, with suggestions that his youngest son may occupy the executive seat in the region in the 2024 regional elections. In light of this situation, many Indonesians expressed frustration and a desire to avoid a similar pattern of deception. They cited the example of President Jokowi’s appointment of his brother-in-law as chairman of the Constitutional Court, which subsequently altered the criteria for presidential and vice-presidential candidates. This resulted in Jokowi’s first son becoming a vice-presidential candidate in the February 2024 presidential election, which he ultimately won.

The “Emergency Warning” alarm extended an invitation to all members of the public, regardless of their background or affiliation, to participate in a targeted protest action on 22 August 2024. The protest would take place at designated protest points, including the offices of the DPR or the Regional House of Representatives (*Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah*, DPRD) in each city. In Bandung, I had the privilege to participate in a similar protest in front of the West Java DPRD office on Diponegoro Street, only about 100 meters away from the West Java Governor’s Office – a location that has been popular for public protests since the New Order era.



The protest commenced at 9:00 am. Student groups from a variety of universities arrived, bearing posters, student flags, and alma mater jackets, which served to distinguish them from other groups and symbolize their identity as students. Each student representative took the opportunity to make a public speech, in which they explained the reasons behind their protest.

As the day progressed, groups of students from other educational institutions, including junior high schools, high schools, and vocational schools, arrived. They were part of the Bandung Student School Alliance (*Aliansi Pelajar Bandung*). These students were not wearing school uniforms, but instead black shirts, jackets, and hoodies. However, their trousers still bore the hallmarks of a school uniform. It seems that wearing black has become something of a dress code for young people when there is a protest in Bandung. This was initiated by radical autonomous groups, referred to by the public and even by the police as anarchy groups, or *hitam-hitam* (black) groups. Internationally, they are also known as the Black Bloc movement. This movement emerged in the late 1990s in association with punk groups, joining other civil society groups seeking to challenge the New Order regime.

By the end of the afternoon, the area became a rather somber shade of black. The cooler weather seemed to intensify the protesters' frustration, as there was still no sign from the DPRD. They began to pelt the office with stones from the pavement tiles, including burning objects around the office gate, in an effort to persuade the DPRD members to meet them. By nightfall, the gates had been brought down. The police had fired water cannons, but there were no rubber bullets or tear gas, unlike in previous demonstrations on May Day and *#reformasidikorupsi* in 2019, Ombus Law in 2020, and on the Criminal Code-KUHP revision in 2022. Following the collapse of



the DPRD gate, the police maintained their position while the protesters continued to attempt to enter the building. Ultimately unsuccessful, as the night progressed, the protesters gradually dispersed.

Despite the crowd having dispersed, the situation remained tense. The police officers were still carrying out searches and making arrests of people wearing black clothing. At least dozens of people were arrested, although they were subsequently released through the help of public legal aid organizations.

It seems that the protests were successful in preventing Jokowi's youngest son from becoming a regional executive candidate. However, there are still several laws considered for revision, and the next most urgent one will be the revision of the Military and Police Laws. Fears are that this would encourage the return of the ABRI *Dwi Fungsi*¹ (dual function), which was eliminated during the political reform era after Suharto.

In response, on 28 August 2024, the protest resumed, this time with a demonstration accompanied by music and poetry performances. These were intended to convey rejection of the proposed revisions to the Military and Police Laws, as well as demands for accountability in relation to past human rights violations by the military and police. These include the abduction of activists during the 1998 protests, military operations in Papua, police violence during arrests in various places in Indonesia, and the resolution of the Kanjuruhan tragedy in 2022, in which hundreds of people died in the football stadium due to tear gas and police actions.

1 The *dwi fungsi* was a doctrine of the Suharto era that designated both military and civilian functions to the Armed Forces, for instance through positions in the public service and reserved military-only seats in the parliament. For further information, see Kingsbury (2000).



This protest was initiated by an autonomous group identified with the Black Bloc. The protest commenced with the preparation of a street stage in front of a *kolbak* (pick up) car with the DPRD building as a background. The musical equipment was set with electricity obtained from two generators. Protesters took to the streets, putting on a series of performances featuring a diverse range of artists, from folk musicians to poets to hardcore punk bands. The latter proved particularly popular with young people.

The symbol of the protest this time was replaced by the snake hand in a form of a hand holding a poisonous snake with the words “*organisir*” (organize) underneath. The symbol was displayed on a large cloth banner installed at the entrance of the DPRD office. Other protest artifacts with this symbol, including posters, flyers, zines, and stickers, were distributed to the public. On these artefacts, one could find inscriptions like: *Ambang Batas Kesadaran* (The Threshold of Consciousness), *Karena pesta rakyat sesungguhnya bukan pilkada tetapi turun ke jalan!* (Because the People’s Party is not really a regional election, but taking to the streets!), or *Siaran darurat bukan hanya perkara Pilkada* (Emergency broadcasts are not only about regional elections).

In this action, there were also several short speeches explaining how dangerous the Police and Military Laws are for civilians, and how the Jokowi regime has also created the criminal code, which will be actively enforced next year, further strengthening state control and making it easy for anyone to be arrested. There were also simulations on how to deal with the police if arrested, including the introduction of outfits and personal equipment, such as helmets, masks, thick clothes that can withstand rubber bullets, and other personal protection that must be prepared if one wants to join a protest.

As the evening proceeded, the protest took on more vibrant aspects, with colored lights, flares, and lively music. The crowd engaged in a variety of activities, like dancing in a style reminiscent of the punk culture, playing with plastic balls, and enjoying food provided by the informal sector or from food solidarities. The protesters dispersed peacefully, but it seems that the struggle is not yet over, as the DPR is still trying to pass the problematic law by October 2024.

LENGAUER: *Images accompanying official media reports painfully bring back memories of 1998. What is similar and what is different from the mass protests back then?*

PRASETYO: The images appear to convey a sense of frustration and discontent towards the Jokowi government, the DPR, and its affiliated parties. A similar situation occurred during the New Order regime of General Suharto and his associates in the DPR, dominated by the Golkar Party. There was a great deal of frustration and anger about the Asian economic crisis, which occurred without any significant efforts by the government to solve it, especially in terms of food supplies. Instead, instances of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (“KKN”, *korupsi, kolusi, nepotisme*) could be observed among government officials and businessmen.

Following the reform, in 2014, Indonesia elected a president who was initially held in high regard by the people, largely due to his approachable demeanor and emphasis on *kerakyatan* (being close to the ordinary people), rather than on party-centric policies, oligarchs, or supporters of neoliberalism. President Jokowi was in power for two terms (2014-2024). However, in the early days of his first term, there were already concerns that his approach might be similar to that of the New Order regime. His second term was a different experience for many. Some have drawn comparisons between this period and the New Order regime. My suggestion is that Jokowi could be regarded as a civilian version of Suharto. Suharto conducted his activities in a covert manner, whereas Jokowi is more transparent in his approach.

I propose that what sets the protest back then and the current protests apart is the fact that, in 1998, many were initiated by students and pro-democracy activists, as well as labor organizations. This resulted in difficulty in identifying a specific identity perspective. In the Jokowi era, protests encompass a diverse range of civil society groups. It is also notable that junior high school, high school, and vocational school students have joined the protests, highlighting concerns about the future and the affordability of education. Furthermore, a number of other civil factions have emerged, based on a variety of identity formations. These include religious groups, musicians, punks, and even left-wing radical groups.

The advent of democracy has afforded Jokowi to serve two terms in office. At the same time, it has also provided civil society with the chance to engage in political discourse, participate in the political process, and even protest on the streets, print media, online media, and social media. Democracy is occurring at the lower levels of society, not only among elites and activists. However, there is also a growing polarization based on differences regarding issues, political framings, *blok politik*- (political bloc-), parties, civil organizations, as well as identity-related differences. For instance, in demonstrations held during the Jokowi administration, labor organizations have often been present, particularly when expressing their opposition to the enactment



of the Omnibus Law, as it has a direct bearing on their interests. However, in the Emergency Warning or Criminal Code-KUHP Protest, it would have been beneficial to see more labor organizations participating. But, the majority have become part of the Labor Party that is now in Jokowi's circle of power.

LENGAUER: *How was it possible that thousands of activists organized and took to the streets in a collective act on such a short notice? I've heard people lament the organizational power of students today. But apparently, it was possible to stage (once again) massive, nation-wide protests. How is this possible?*

PRASETYO: The internet and social media play an important role in the dissemination of information, which can sometimes lead to spontaneous protests, even in the absence of organized planning. It seems that the public is increasingly aware of its desire to be involved in a protest action. It is possible that this might not have occurred in an era of activism without mobile phones, the internet, and even social media. During the New Order era, protests were typically preceded by numerous meetings between activist groups. These meetings were held with the aim of reaching agreements on the timing and issues to be addressed. In the era of the internet and social media, public mobilization can occur spontaneously, and is joined by individuals or small groups who feel they have the right to speak. Individuals who previously engaged in diverse activities can readily participate in a protest. Similarly, school students who have finished their classes can also join a protest. Even those who work in the informal sector and who are dispersed in various locations can swiftly unite to organize themselves and contribute to a larger protest.



However, in the Jokowi era, students are viewed as future leaders who should dedicate their time at university to studying. Curriculum changes resulted in students having less free time to organize, let alone protest. Students are now facing significant financial challenges due to changes in the governance of public state universities by changing their status to PTN-BH (*Perguruan Tinggi Negeri-Badan Hukum*, State Legal Entity Universities), which are profit-oriented following a neoliberal university system. This has led to increased pressure on students to complete their studies within a shorter timeframe if they wish to avoid additional costs.

This bears resemblance to the NKK/BKK (*Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus / Badan Koordinasi Kemahasiswaan*, Normalization of Campus Life/Body of Student Coordination) system implemented by the New Order to universities in the mid-1970s, which had the aim of preventing students from interfering in government affairs and political activities, and limiting students' freedom of expression, including the elimination of student councils (Sapiie, 2016). This policy emerged following the Malari² incident in 1974 (involving ABRI violence), the first significant student movement to challenge the New Order policy.

The protest is a reflection of the frustration and discontent felt by many, particularly university students, school student, young people, and people who are facing challenges in various aspects of their lives. The current economic, educational, and political situation is creating uncertainty and instability, and it is concerning to see that the government and members of parliament are not addressing these concerns adequately.

2 *Malari*, acronym for *Malapetaka Lima Belas Januari* (Fifteenth of January Disaster) was a student demonstration and a subsequent riot in January 1974, when students protested against the visit of the Japanese prime minister, against foreign investment and corruption.

LENGAUER: *There have been a series of images circulating on social media calling for action under the slogan “Peringatan Darurat” (emergency warning). These images are full of symbolism. As a photographer, what do you consider the value of this art? Was it circulated by a particular group? Who is the audience of these images? Who is able to decipher the message?*

PRASETYO: On 21 August 2024, an “Emergency Warning” poster/video with a blue-screen background began circulating online. A number of social media users have been sharing a mock-up of an emergency alert system to express their concern over a potential constitutional crisis following the DPR’s move to subvert a Constitutional Court ruling that lowers the electoral threshold for the November regional head elections. The image, which features the national state emblem Garuda Pancasila, was taken from a video of a hypothetical emergency system uploaded by the YouTube channel EAS Indonesia Concept in 2022 as part of an analogue horror movie project. From a visual perspective, the blue background with the prominent white Garuda Pancasila emblem and the text “Emergency Warning” creates a striking contrast and is both eye-catching and photographic when displayed in public spaces, particularly in a dynamic demonstration setting, whether mounted on a wall that is typically white or held by demonstrators. It is likely that the public is able to easily recognize it. It establishes a visual identity and history of the mass movement.

In terms of sound, the tone accompanying the image on social media is reminiscent of television from the New Order era. At that time, there was only one television station in Indonesia, namely TVRI (Republic of Indonesia Television), and all programs were subject to state control. In my memory, the screen used to shake with a rough, hoarse, intermittent sound, which indicated that the broadcast is being disrupted by the government. Such instances typically involved a speech by the



president or the minister of information, wherein the government's achievements, state emergencies, or natural disasters were reported. Such sudden interruptions effectively disrupted the ongoing broadcast, which could be perceived as an indication of government control over the media. This blue screen never happened again as broadcasting technology has become more sophisticated and there is no longer a state monopoly on television. However, when entering the computerization era with Windows as the operating system, a blue screen meant that the system is experiencing a critical error, known as the Blue Screen of Death. So, the blue screen symbol in this protest call is on point.³

The Garuda Pancasila emblem is not commonly used in public spaces, let alone in protests. It is usually displayed in public spaces as a symbol of nationalism. For instance, one may observe such displays on posters in elementary, junior high, and high school classrooms, flanked on either side by photos of the incumbent president and vice president. Garuda Pancasila posters are also typically located in government rooms or offices. The emblem can also be seen in various sports arenas in Indonesia. This is intended to symbolize a sense of nationalism and that there is something to be won – just like the purpose of this protest: There is something that must be won by the people.

LENGAUER: These are not the first mass protests in recent years. During Jokowi's second term, activists had gathered numerous times in protest against the government. What was the public image of these protests? Did the government try to coopt, ridicule, or corner the protesters in official discourse? What were the greatest challenges activists faced in making their voices heard?

³ For the role of sound in social media campaigns, see also Jurriens et al. (2024).



PRASETYO: Jokowi's election for a second term and the global pandemic presented significant challenges for the people. This period saw Jokowi and the DPR engage in a series of political maneuvers and policy decisions that introduced authoritarianism into the government system. These involved collusion and nepotism, as well as the hijacking of the reform's achievements. An example is the destruction of the Corruption Eradication Commission (*Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi*, KPK). This prompted the biggest protest after the reform, #reformasidikorupsi 2019, which resulted in a decline of public trust in Jokowi's government. The #reformasidikorupsi protest was a significant and widespread event that lasted for almost two weeks and took place in numerous cities. Unfortunately, it resulted in considerable damage to infrastructure and a number of injuries and deaths. It is thought that the protests could have paved the way for a second reform, potentially leading to an overthrow of Jokowi in a similar manner to the first reform which successfully overthrew Suharto. However, Jokowi was able to defuse the situation by reaching out to political parties and the opposition. He also succeeded in fostering a sense of unity and cooperation between the military and police, who were able to provide robust security for the ongoing protests. Given that the majority of the protests were student-led, Jokowi leveraged his influence to encourage the leaders of public universities to administratively suppress students who participated in the protests. This involved addressing concerns over academic performance and university expulsion. This approach proved effective. There was a notable decrease in student-led protests during the second week. However, other civilian groups, who have historically been more independent in their actions, continued to demonstrate.

In the #reformasidikorupsi protests, the DPR was able to successfully pass a new law banning wiretapping, searches, and seizures by the KPK without permission from the supervisory board which is appointed by the president. Jokowi also approved the



appointment of a new KPK leader – a senior police figure who is currently facing corruption charges. Under Jokowi, the police have been permitted to gradually place their representatives in a number of other important state institutions, including the cabinet, the intelligence agency, and the national logistics agency, among others. The destruction of the KPK is thus not an isolated incident.

There is a significant social movement underway in Indonesia that is expressing concerns about the direction of the country under the leadership of Jokowi and his collaborators in the DPR. There is no opposition party in parliament that supports the people's movement.⁴ Jokowi is using his power in a way that allows him to exert control over the media, including social media. This is achieved by involving paid influencers tasked with promoting the idea that the country is doing well and that Jokowi is still the best person to lead the country. It seems we must rely on the grassroots – the student, youth, labor, farmers' and the urban-rural poor, indigenous people, and women's movement, many autonomous groups, and other civil rights movements – to continue the struggle against the unjust, repressive state policies under the control of the neoliberal, authoritarian-populist regime.

LENGAUER: One final question: After reformasi, young people have gathered around local movements, like Jogja Memanggil or Bandung's Aksi Kamisan, building alliances with urban poor, peasants, and human rights activists. Have such initiatives attracted activist students and, if so, how?

4 During the Jokowi era, there were several parties that were not part of the government, such as the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). However, they never declared themselves to be in opposition. The PDI-P is the party with the most seats in parliament, but this has not automatically made it an opposition to the government; in fact, in several decisions to ratify important laws, such as the Omnibus Law and Criminal Code, all parties in parliament agreed.





PRASETYO: I believe that initiatives involving cross-organizations, cross-groups – in Bandung we call them cross-hangouts (*lintas tongkrongan*) – play an important role in distributing knowledge, educating, and organizing. They also have the potential to be effective in agitating against power and encouraging the power of civil society. The *Jogya Memanggil* (Jogya Calling) or *Gejayan Memanggil* (Gejayan Calling) movement first emerged when the #reformasidikorupsi protest in 2019 saw the involvement of a more organized student movement through universities, although, in practice, it still received support from civil society. In Yogyakarta, there is also an *Aksi Kamisan* (Thursday Protest) carried out at Tugu Jogja since 2013, though it is not as consistent as the *Aksi Kamisan* in Jakarta, or Bandung.⁵

It is worth noting that the Thursday Protest in Bandung in 2013 marked a significant milestone in Indonesia's history of Thursday Protests, as it was the first such protest to take place in the country, since the protest had commenced in Jakarta in 2007. The Thursday Protest in Bandung was carried out in front of Gedung Sate, which is of great historical significance and houses the offices of the Governor of West Java and the West Java DPRD. This location had also been used as a venue for protests in the New Order era, due to its central location and convenient accessibility. Since the

5 The *Aksi Kamisan* has been initiated by the families of the victims of the Semanggi tragedy, where activists were shot dead at Jakarta's Semanggi intersection in late 1998. Every Thursday afternoon, since 2007 until present, together with the wider public, the families of the victims stand in protest in front of the Indonesian Presidential Palace carrying black umbrellas and wearing black clothes. This protest has spread to many cities in Indonesia, one of which is Bandung since 2013. This protest has been inspired by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo movement in response to the forced disappearance of political opponents in Argentina between 1976 and 1983. Mothers protest by unfurling cloths with the names of their disappeared family members at Plaza de Mayo, opposite Casa Rosada, the presidential palace, in Buenos Aires.

West Java DPRD became relocated to a new building situated opposite Gedung Sate, this area continues to be a focal point for demonstrators and is an appropriate place for the Thursday Protest as a spatial-physical movement.

The Thursday Protest in Bandung was not initiated by students or human rights NGOs. It was initiated by an individual who cared about human rights, namely the mime-pantomime artist Wanggi Hood, who first carried out the protest in 2013.

I happened to witness this protest by chance when I was riding a motorbike and stopped to greet an old friend. I attempted to participate, but was more inclined to document the event through photography. In all of his performances, Wanggi has a distinctive style, painting his face white and wearing black or white clothes. He also used a black umbrella symbolizing the connection to Jakarta's *Aksi Kamisan*.

Bandung's *Aksi Kamisan* has become one of the most consistent and long-standing Thursday Protests, alongside the one in Jakarta. It has evolved to encompass a broader range of social and political issues, include house evictions, land disputes, police-military violence, labor concerns, sexual violence, women's and children's rights, freedom of expression, and diversity issues. The attendees are a diverse group, although the majority are young people. There is a growing interest in more specific political, social, and economic issues, and the Thursday Protest is becoming a regular weekly event for people to voice their concerns or simply spend the afternoon together, making it more inclusive and free.

Last but not least, in recent years, Bandung's *Aksi Kamisan* was 'graced' by the presence of school children still in uniform, the majority of whom were from high school or vocational school, although some were still in junior high school. They were not embarrassed, and did not feel ashamed or inferior to the 'old' people, university students, or activists of the demonstrations. Their presence is a welcome sign of a new generation of activists, who is able to draw on their own experiences and knowledge without feeling pressured by the seniority of the movement. This is an important step forward, both in terms of strategy and practice. This is what sets Bandung apart from the Thursday Protests in Jakarta and even Yogyakarta. Bandung's *Aksi Kamisan* has become an open space, less hierarchical, and with a greater focus on inclusivity and a diversity of issues and identities. It is possible for anyone to take part, provided that the issue concerns injustice and inequality. The location is always the same, and there is no risk of intimidation from the police, military, or paramilitary.

LENGAUER: *Thank you!*



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Emergency Activism

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DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.

