



‘Little Davids fighting against Goliath’: Standing up for peaceful assembly in Indonesia

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Abstract: Past Indonesian governments have infamously quelled movement for human rights reform. Now protestors face water cannons, tear gas, rubber bullets and police brutality as the incumbent regime of Prabowo Subianto turns its back on freedom of peaceful assembly.

The United Nations (UN) defines the right to peaceful assembly as a ‘fundamental human right that enables individuals to express themselves collectively and to participate in shaping their societies’. First guaranteed under Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR](#)) and soon after in Article 21 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights ([ICCPR](#)) and Article 24 of the [ASEAN Human Rights Declaration](#), this [fundamental right](#) has thrust people—including marginalised groups left out of the state radar—to show their dismay against incompetent and draconian regimes. General

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Comment No 37 on Article 21 of the ICCPR, passed in 2020, outlines the breadth and scope of this fundamental right.

Because of the immense power attributed to this universal right, people's right to march on the streets against social injustices is under attack worldwide. In the United States (US), the leader of the free world President Donald Trump [threatened](#) to incarcerate students holding peaceful protests, a clear violation of the US First Amendment to the Constitution and international human rights standards. Trump's volatile and inept rhetoric against this right resonates with the thinking of most authoritarian regimes in the Asia Pacific region.

The situation is not much better in Indonesia. Here, the drastic decline of democracy has resulted in various challenges and limitations towards implementing the right to peaceful assembly in accordance with Law No. 9 of 1998 on Freedom to Express an Opinion in Public. Over the past few years, violence and intimidation against protesting human rights defenders have been strikingly prevalent in intensity. This trend is evidenced by how the past Indonesian governments vehemently responded to civil society-led protests—tear gas, rubber bullets, water cannons, and [incessant beatings](#) await courageous human rights stalwarts.

Some regulations forbid and prevent people from assembling or gathering by labelling or deeming it as an act of disobedience, whatever the occasion is. People who assemble or gather face stigma [and are considered] lawless or rebellious.

(Julius Ibrani, Chairperson of Perhimpunan Bantuan Hukum Indonesia)

Draconian laws curtailing civil liberties

Several laws dubbed as 'repressive' or 'draconian' and incompatible with international human rights standards were introduced and implemented under the auspices of former President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo. Amnesty International Indonesia reported that months into the lethal COVID-19 pandemic, authorities rounded up and detained [6,658 protesters](#) from 21 provinces, while 402 faced police violence across 15 provinces, all while rallying against Jokowi's Omnibus Law on Job Creation in 2020. The controversial law included lenient regulations for [coal companies](#), encouraged deforestation, and exclusion of marginalised groups in the environmental impact assessment process (colloquially known as AMDAL), leading to greater risks of climate injustice.

Two years later, when Jokowi introduced eyebrow-raising revisions to the Criminal Code, at least 40 protesters who took to the streets [suffered injuries](#) after police fired back using tear gas and water cannons. Some of the problematic provisions in the revamped Criminal Code include outlawing adultery, premarital cohabitation, rules on demonstration, and criticising the president.

In 2024, groups of activists thwarted the House of Representatives' attempt to revise Law No 10 of 2016 on Regional Elections amicable to political dynasties. The series of protests

is dubbed the Emergency Alert strikes (*Peringatan Darurat* Indonesia), signifying that democracy is in 'a state of emergency'. In response, police arrested at least [344 protesters](#), including 78 children and staff of the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute and the Lokataru Foundation, while at least 152 suffered from physical injuries. In [Bandung and Semarang provinces](#), several activists suffered from nausea and injuries after police used tear gas and batons to disperse them. Amnesty International Indonesia also observed that Indonesian police resort to using batons, water cannons, tear gas, and excessive force towards peaceful protesters, all while affluent politicians continue to enjoy immunity from public scrutiny. Amnesty International recorded at least 328 physical and digital attacks on human rights defenders between 2019 to 2022, resulting in a total of at least [834 victims](#).

Peaceful assembly has been threatened in Papua and West Papua provinces, two of the poorest provinces in Indonesia. It was reported that activists campaigning for the [right to self-determination](#) in the region battled with forced dispersals and intimidation from the police. Human rights organisation Tapol tallied a total of [97 incidents of violations](#) of freedom of expression and right to peaceful assembly in West Papua in 2023, while authorities brutally attacked at least [74 people](#) protesting against the controversial Special Autonomy Law in Papua a year before. The violent crackdown on protests is on top of the various mining and state surveillance activities in the area, as evidenced by the [shooting of activists](#) campaigning against gold mines operated by the government and multinational companies in Central Papua.

Hundreds of exasperated Indonesians staged back-to-back demonstrations in March against the recently revamped Indonesian Military Law, or *Tentara Nasional Indonesia*. Under the controversial changes, men in uniform are now eligible to undertake civilian duties across [14 state agencies](#), and the retirement age has been increased to 63.

Protesters were aghast to see how the police responded to their peaceful gathering. In Malang, East Java province, at least [eight campus journalists](#), several pro bono lawyers, student activists, and even paramedics who tended to wounded protesters were injured. One of the student activists, who suffered from a broken jaw, skull, and teeth after being repeatedly beaten by a police officer, sought emergency medical assistance from a human rights organisation in Jakarta after being referred by local legal representatives.

Thirsting for human rights through Thursday protests

The vexatious reports of suppressing the right to peaceful assembly did not deter human rights defenders, especially those whose dedication stood the test of time. The most notable is the [Kamis](#), an action protest held every Thursday afternoon in front of the Merdeka Palace in Jakarta. Since 2007, human rights defenders have been wearing black shirts and carrying black umbrellas denouncing the authorities' silence on enforced

disappearances during the *Reformasi* era and the [killing of renowned activist](#) Munir Said Thalib in 2004.

As someone who has observed the *Kamisan* protests in 2018 and 2024, I can say their efforts, however small, cannot be underestimated. After every protest, activists sent a letter highlighting their demands for human rights and democracy. They submitted 476 letters urging the Indonesian government to address various human rights during the two consecutive terms of Jokowi. Upon the ascension of Prabowo, a former general and Suharto's ex-son-in-law who is involved in the [killing, torture, and enforced disappearances](#) of anti-Suharto protesters, Indonesians of Chinese descent in 1998 as well as gross human rights violations in Timor-Leste from 1974 to 1999, the *Kamisan* group decided [not to send letters](#) to the Merdeka palace.

Suci Wati, Munir's wife and co-founder of the *Kamisan* movement, asserted that they would continue to speak out against the criminalisation of activists:

We will continue to encourage the enforcement of human rights through criticism and peaceful demonstrations such as the *Kamisan* action.

'Little Davids fighting against Goliath'

Indonesia's silencing of critical voices mirrors the global regression of the right to peaceful assembly worldwide. Marginalised groups, including youth and human rights defenders, rarely participate in policy spaces or decision-making processes; in some circumstances, collective action is the only way for civil society to challenge the pervasive and repressive system governing them. Therefore, it is prudent for authorities to exercise tolerance and avoid resorting to lethal force in pacifying peaceful protests, and at the same time, hear out their pleas for a paradigm shift to human rights and social justice.

Jesse Adam Halim, a middle-aged Indonesian activist, compared civil society's struggles to the Biblical tale of David and Goliath:

We need not a prophetic miracle but a joint consolidation, mapping potential threats and vulnerabilities that may occur, and formulating new strategies and tactics between civil society to strengthen the movement and divide roles in joint advocacy. The unity of the little Davids is the only option to increase our chances of fighting Goliath.