

Political Conflicts

Why are demonstrators against Indonesia's Omnibus Law in awe of Thailand's protesters? It's all about perseverance



Protesters in Bandung, Indonesia march against the Omnibus Law on October 20. Photo: DPA

On October 20, a year to the day after Indonesia's President Joko Widodo was sworn into his second term in office, hundreds of protesters gathered at a prominent road in Jakarta. They were students, civil activists and members of labour organisations, wearing colourful jackets and T-shirts representing their various groups.

They mostly sat on the road, idly listening to speeches and chatting with their peers or eating meals sold by street food vendors – but ears pricked up when a speaker from a labour group, on a makeshift stage atop a pickup truck, said: “Protesters in Thailand are still taking to the streets to demand for change!”

“I really respect the Thai students because their struggle is harder than the struggle faced by Indonesian students,” the 21-year-old said, referring to the view that in Thailand demonstrations continued even after the use of deterrents such as water cannons, while in Indonesia many protesters would scatter. “It is inspiring to see, but our situation here is different. If we were to use their strategy, we need to make adjustments and improve it so that we can be more organised.”

Indonesia's protest movement has one goal in mind: to push Widodo to repeal the Omnibus Law, also known as the jobs creation bill, which was passed on October 5 in a bid to boost employment by cutting red tape that has long deterred foreign investors.

Critics say the bill, which amends more than 70 existing laws, will erode the rights of workers and indigenous people, reducing their income and weakening environmental protections. Its passing was met with huge protests across the archipelagic nation, driven by university students, labour unions and civil groups.

On October 8, police clashed with protesters in Jakarta after some threw rocks at the authorities, and a number of public facilities, including bus stops and police posts, were burned down. Police used rubber bullets, tear gas, and water cannons to disperse the crowds, while footage also emerged of the authorities beating protesters and journalists.

The demonstrations are still going on in Indonesia, though the number of participants has dwindled in recent days. In Thailand, however, the protest movement calling for the ouster of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha's government and the reform of the monarchy continues to escalate, in defiance of a ban on gatherings, long-held taboos about publicly criticising the royal family and the arrests of more than 70 people, including prominent protest leaders.

To Edward Aspinall, a long-time Southeast Asia watcher and professor of politics at the Australian National University's Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, the Thai protesters' persistence is a sign of the movement's potential longevity.

"Those are the moments when student mobilisations can really sustain themselves, whereas the typical pattern in an issue-based protest in a democratic country is that you will see the protests being more episodic," he said. "It sort of rises and falls and is in sync with a particular issue. And when an issue comes up, in this case the passage of [Indonesia's] job creation law, you can often see a rapid spike of protest, but that could be difficult to sustain when it's not as bad as the fundamental issue of the design of the regime."

Aspinall pointed to the so-called Reformasi Dikorupsi – or "Corrupted Reformation" – protests in September last year against a law that diminished the independence of Indonesia's Corruption Eradication Commission, which had been consistently voted the country's most trusted institution. Thousands of people took to the streets in the first few days, but the rallies died down soon after.

"The Reformasi Dikorupsi protest was only last year. It seems that student activism could enter a new phase in Indonesia and could give rise to the further way of street mobilisation, but I wouldn't be surprised if now [the protest against the Omnibus Law] starts to die," Aspinall said.

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