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## Repression of Nonviolent Movements:

The Usage of Disproportionate Force and  
Political Manipulation in Indonesia

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# Repression of Nonviolent Movements: The Usage of Disproportionate Force and Political Manipulation in Indonesia

## Introduction

In post-authoritarian democracies, public protest serves as a critical barometer of the political and democratic state. For Indonesia, whose contemporary political identity was forged in the crucible of the 1998 Reformasi movement, freedom of assembly and expression is not merely a constitutional right, but is supposed to be a foundational principle of its democratic transition (Asih et al., 2025; Munir & Ilham, 2021). However, since the Reformasi, it has been constantly challenged. The events of the #ResetIndonesia protest from August to September once again cast light on the fragility of these principles, including Indonesia's democracy itself. Ever since the demonstration began, a massive force of police and military personnel has been deployed around Jakarta and other cities in Indonesia, allowing for significant control over the demonstration itself (Ramadhani et al., 2025). During this wave of protests, the people faced economic hardship while the Parliament members were planning to bolster their salaries by around Rp 50 million (equivalent to \$3,000); this was perceived as ignorant and insensitive towards the structural economic challenges faced by the people (Oktafian, 2025; Lai, 2025). In these waves of protests, protesters chose the creative path by, for example, raising donations and fundraising all over the country and Southeast Asia, supplying food cooked by mothers in several cities (one of them Ibu Berisik in Yogyakarta), and conducting sousveillance in the digital world to refute the framings of "treason" and "anarchism" (Nugroho, 2025; Varally & Muflihun, 2025).

However, instead of engaging in a substantive dialogue with the protesters, the state deployed a dual strategy of physical coercion and political manipulation to dismantle and delegitimize the movement (Gunawan, 2025). Thus, this article

argues that such actions by the state reflect an embedded, systematic logic that legitimizes repression towards public dissent. This logic operates through the combination of overt violence and narrative framing to portray protesters as illegitimate actors, leading the state to justify its abandonment of “protective duties”. Across cities all over Indonesia, disproportionate force was used against protesters in demonstrations, resulting in loss of lives, injuries, and unlawful mass arrest of protesters and activists; many of whom were minors (Amri et al., 2025; Ato et al., 2025; CNN Indonesia, 2025b). Activists such as Delpedro Marhaen, M. Fakhrurrozi (Paul), Syahdan Husein, Muzaffar Salim, Khariq Anhar, and Laras Faizati were detained. This showcases that state-sanctioned violence was met with an absence of high-level accountability and justice. President Prabowo offered no accountability or efforts to bring justice for the civilian deaths, including the death of Affan Kurniawan. Instead, the blame has always been targeted towards the protesters, naming them as a ‘foreign power’ or ‘antek asing’ that wishes to dismantle Indonesia’s political stability (Sekretariat Presiden, 2025). Other than that, an insensitive statement was delivered by Prabowo after visiting police members who were injured during the demonstration, stating that

*“Puluhan petugas yang berkorban, polisi [dari] siang-malam menjaga keamanan. Di seluruh pelosok tanah air. Saya ucapkan terima kasih [kepada] mereka atas negara. Saya perintahkan mereka diberikan penghargaan, naik pangkat”* (Harian Surya, 2025).

“Dozens of officers have made sacrifices, police [from] day and night, maintaining security, in all corners of the country. I express my gratitude [to] them for the country. I order them to be given awards, promotions” (Harian Surya, 2025).

The support for security apparatuses was then confirmed as Prabowo announced his intention to promote the police officers who were injured. This decision validated the actions of the state’s agents while completely negating the suffering of its citizens. Thus, an important element of the state’s strategy was to shape a public narrative that portrayed the protesters as responsible for the disorders (TEMPO, 2025). In Jakarta, for example, the burning of public transportation was being blamed on the demonstrators. Yet, locals living near Senen Sentral Station (31/08) did not blame the vandalism on protesters, believing instead that it was

a result of systematic plans to disrupt the protest (Fadilah, 2025). Such claims openly ignored the number of evidence and past playbooks. This brings back the game plan from the 2019 #ReformasiDikorupsi protests, which highlights the involvement of provocateurs deployed to create a guise for a crackdown (Hanifan & Sumandoyo, 2020; Sastramidjaja et al., 2022). Building on this foundation, this article unpacks the state’s strategy in two sections.

The first section of this brief analyzes the creation of political manipulation to influence public consciousness, particularly in the use of scapegoating, narrative play, and the weaponization of the law to criminalize dissent (Magdych, 2020). The second section will highlight the state’s failure as a duty bearer to fulfill the civilians’ rights by continuous disproportionate use of force and examine the necropolitical dimensions of the response, analyzing how the death of 10 protesters was systematically devalued and instrumentalized to reinforce state power and close possibilities for justice (Mbembe, 2003; Tomuschat, 2014).

### **The Playbook of Manipulation: Scapegoating and Criminalisation of Dissent**

The state’s effort to delegitimize the protest was a project of manipulation, built upon a manipulated narrative, scapegoating, and the use of legal instruments. According to Magdych (2020), such forms of political manipulation are meant to reshape public consciousness and affect emotional compass. This strategy operates by intervening in the values that form the motivational basis of political behavior, aiming to shift them in a state-favored direction. For example, by framing protesters as a threat to national order, it is evident that the state uses traditional values of “security” and “stability” as justifications within the public consciousness (Buzan et al, 1998).

Another tactic in this approach is misusing the term “anarchist,” which leads to dissent being wrongly labeled as “anarchism.” In Indonesia’s political conversation, “anarchist” has lost its original meaning of supporting self-governing societies without state hierarchy. Instead, it is now reflecting the New Order’s focus on stability and control (Rizki, 2025; Zubaidah et al., 2023). The term is now often used as a political tool to discredit protests. By calling protests “anarchist” and acts of terror (see: Sekretariat Presiden, 2025), the state dismisses protesters’ claims and strengthens its authority by spreading fear. This serves two purposes:

first, it separates protesters from the public by making them appear dangerous, and, second, it justifies the use of force against them. As a result, inviting people to protest—a supposed-to-be basic democratic right—was portrayed as causing chaos.

Despite these attempts to shape public opinion, the state's hypocrisy became clear. While it condemned protesters for allegedly damaging public facilities, it was itself involved in even greater destruction of public goods and green spaces to benefit corporate and political interests (Jong, 2023; Sani & Syamsuddin, 2025). This selective outrage confirms that the state's narrative is not driven by a genuine concern for public order but by a political imperative to control and suppress opposition.

While the framing of protests continues, the criminalization of activists happens and leads to the weaponization of the law. By targeting a visible figure, the law is being used as a political weapon (Blaine & Kettler, 1971). Faced with Delpedro's claims of an unlawful arrest lacking evidence, on Tuesday (9/9), Yusril Ihza Mahendra, Coordinating Minister for Legal, Human Rights, Immigration, and Correction, responded by stating "to follow the lawful procedure" instead of talking about how this unlawful arrest trespasses on foundational human rights to protest (CNN Indonesia, 2025a). This statement from a high-profile legal expert served as a signal of elite impunity, demonstrating how proceduralism can be invoked to mask substantive injustice (Irianto, 2024). With the occurrence of an unlawful arrest, the state has failed to fulfill its duty to ensure the people's rights to protest and Delpedro's rights to organize a nonviolent protest.

Other than the arrest of activists and protesters, the entire game plan of manipulation was validated and practiced at the highest level of government. President Prabowo's public statements on the demonstrations were a rhetorical deflection of narrative control (Harian Surya, 2025). There was no acknowledgement of the protesters killed by state forces, such as Iko Juliant Junior and Rheza Sedy Pratama. Rather, in Prabowo's remarks, the focus was on the number of police officers injured, positioning the police as victims of the events rather than underlining the civilian deaths. He also conveniently ignored the state's excessive and disproportionate use of force, such as the use of rubber bullets and expired tear gas (Budiman & Widiyanto, 2025). By constructing this narrative, the state employs

discourse as a means to portray itself as acting in self-defense. By this action, the state rationalizes its use of force as a necessary measure, while overlooking the harm to civilians.

### **Necropolitics and the Devaluation of Civilian Lives**

The state's response to Affan Kurniawan's death goes beyond violence and controlling the narrative, showing a deeper use of necropolitics. Mbembe (2003) describes necropolitics as the highest form of state power, where the state decides whose life is reduced to a statistic and whose is seen as a tragedy. The way Affan's killing was handled shows that people who oppose the state are seen as less valuable and politically unimportant. His death was not treated as an injustice needing a response, but as a political issue to be managed and stripped of meaning. In doing so, Affan's life became just a number and part of political theater, not a reason for real accountability (Pratiwi, 2025; Siagian, 2025). The state creates a public order of whose lives deserve to be mourned. Prabowo's praise for the injured police officers put them at the top of this order. Their injuries were described as sacrifices for the country, making their suffering a national concern; meanwhile, Affan and others killed in the protest were made invisible in public discussions. Even right after the skeletons of Reno and Farhan were found in Kwitang, who was confirmed as missing, the state has not given any apologies or commitment to serve justice (Azzahra, 2025). Their deaths were seen as unfortunate, but also as an acceptable result of challenging the state.

The so-called "restitution" for Affan's death also showcases the most crucial evidence of this devaluation. The decision to offer Affan's father a motorbike was less an act of condolence than a calculated act of symbolic violence (Fika, 2025). The process of restitution itself attempted to substitute justice with a material token, seeking to buy closure and silence rather than delivering accountability. This gesture is seen as insulting, not because of the monetary value, but because it misrecognizes the nature of the grievance and a life lost due to a brutal repression by the state. What Affan's family endured was not a private tragedy to be compensated by a "motorbike", but a political crime, certainly one that demands public acknowledgement, legal accountability, and structural reform (Maspul, 2025). By offering a motorbike, the state attempted to transform a public injustice

into a private transaction, thereby closing any further claims for justice. This act of depoliticization turns victims of state violence into beneficiaries of state “kindness,” neutralizing their anger while erasing the state’s responsibility. The entire killing up to the restitution demonstrates a state that does not view all citizens as equals under the protection of the law. Acknowledging the death of Affan Kurniawan is not enough; the state shall be present to hold accountability for the deaths of Septinus Sesa, Muhammad Akbar Basri, Sarinawati, Rusdamdiansyah, Sumari, Rheza Sedy Pratama, Andika Lutfi Falah, and Iko Juliant Junior. For they are not just names, but they are victims of the state’s systemic and direct violence.

## **Conclusion**

When one looks back at the state’s unjust actions, it becomes clear that these repressive measures are part of a larger effort to suppress a democratic movement. By using force and controlling the narrative, the government labels people who are exercising their constitutional rights as violent “anarchists” who deserve condemnation. These actions further show that the state is failing in its basic duty to respect and protect the rights of its citizens. This loss of trust grows even deeper when political stories are used to justify violence. Therefore, may this wave of protest serve as a reminder that the struggle for a substantive democracy, accountability, and the fundamental right to life remains critical in contemporary Indonesian politics.

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