

Suharto-era general inaugurated as Indonesia's next president

Ben McGrath
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On Sunday, Prabowo Subianto was inaugurated as the next president of Indonesia for a five-year term, replacing outgoing president, Joko Widodo. An ex-special forces general and son-in-law of the former dictator Suharto, Prabowo had a long and murderous career in the military before transitioning to politics. His rise to the presidency is a significant warning to the working class in Indonesia.

Prabowo was elected in February, taking 58.59 percent of the vote and defeating his two rivals, Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo, who received 24.95 percent and 16.47 percent of the vote respectively. The election itself was anti-democratic, with eligible candidates required to have the support of parties holding at least 20 percent of seats in parliament or who received at least 25 percent of the vote in the previous election.

Any socialist, communist, or even left-leaning political parties or candidates face prosecution under Suharto's 1966 law banning communism, which has been kept on the books by all subsequent administrations.

Prabowo came to office after serving as defense minister under Widodo since 2019 and is expected to continue many of the policies of the previous administration. Prabowo previously ran for president against Widodo in 2014 and 2019, then received the implicit backing of the now-former president, who increasingly concentrated power in the hands of the presidency during his ten years in office.

Widodo all but openly campaigned for Prabowo, ignoring constitutional restrictions on presidential involvement in elections. The new vice president is Widodo's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka.

At his swearing-in ceremony, Prabowo offered empty phrases about unity and working for "all Indonesians." However, he is a representative of the political-military elite that came to power during Suharto's New Order dictatorship. Suharto seized power through a bloody, CIA-backed coup in 1965 that involved the mass murder of

more than one million members of the Indonesian Communist Party, workers and peasants by military forces and right-wing militias and thugs.

Prabowo, who leads the Gerindra Party, is an extremely wealthy businessman along with his even wealthier brother, Hashim Djojohadikusumo, who has helped finance Prabowo's political ambitions. In 2008, Gerindra split from Golkar, the ruling party of Suharto's regime.

As social and economic conditions decline and the danger of a US-instigated war against China looms, the Indonesian ruling class believes Prabowo is best equipped to suppress workers' growing anger. Highlighting this, Prabowo made a thinly-veiled threat against his political opponents in May, stating: "It's fine for those who don't wish to collaborate. If there are any who prefer to be onlookers from the sidelines, they are welcome to do so... However, if you choose not to cooperate, please do not interfere."

From 1974 to 1998, Prabowo served in the military, with nearly all of his time spent in the Indonesia special forces known as Kopassus, which he led as its general commander from 1995 to 1998. He supported the Suharto regime by violently suppressing discontent and carrying out bloody operations across the country. Prabowo has been implicated in atrocities in East Timor, West Papua, Aceh Province, the suppression of protests in the 1990s, and the kidnapping and murder of activists as Suharto's regime came to an end in 1998. In particular, he was involved in the Kraras Massacre in 1983 in East Timor that left more than 200 civilians and noncombatants dead.

While Prabowo denies his involvement in these crimes, Gerry van Klinken, a researcher on Indonesia, wrote of Kopassus and Prabowo during his first presidential campaign in 2014 that "this force was the New Order's most trusted, most capable, iron fist. It is a miracle we know anything at all about [Prabowo's] activities—elite forces mostly work in secret."

Prabowo is also a US-trained killer, having received instruction at Fort Bragg in North Carolina in 1980 and Fort Benning, Georgia in 1985. Prabowo was also married to Suharto's daughter Titiek from 1983 to 2001 and used his connections with Suharto to act with impunity.

Prabowo's bloody history and close connections to the US government initially proved too exposing for Washington, the supposed defender of "democracy" and "human rights" around the world. It sought to distance itself from Prabowo after the collapse of the Suharto regime, denying him a visa to enter the US during the Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations.

After Prabowo became defense minister, this quickly changed. Prabowo was embraced by the Trump administration amid the growing drive to war against China, which has included whipping up tensions in the South China Sea. He visited the US in 2020 for talks at the Pentagon with then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper, who hailed Prabowo as "our counterpart, in a very important relationship."

The Biden administration similarly embraced Prabowo, who has held numerous talks with US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, including at the Pentagon in August 2023. Biden quickly congratulated Prabowo in a phone call after his election was confirmed in March and sent a delegation to the inauguration ceremony on Sunday. It was led by Washington's UN ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield and included Admiral Samuel Paparo, the commander of the US Indo-Pacific Command, and Daniel Kritenbrink, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

Washington is attempting to coax Indonesia closer into its orbit in order to include the country in its war planning. The Indonesian ruling class, however, postures as "non-aligned," not least because of China's economic weight in the country and the region. China is Indonesia's largest trading partner and Chinese companies have significant investment in the country.

Prabowo declared during his inauguration address: "We will take on the baton of leadership to make Indonesia a strong, prosperous, and independent nation. We do not wish to disturb other countries, just as we expect no other nations to disturb us."

As tensions grow in the region as a result of US provocations, this is becoming increasingly untenable. While Indonesia has no territorial dispute with China, Beijing's ten-dash-line overlaps with Indonesia's Exclusive Economic Zone around the Natuna Islands in the South China Sea. Washington will no doubt look to

exploit this fact to cajole and push Indonesia into taking a stronger stance against Beijing.

In the period between the election and his inauguration, Prabowo visited or met with officials from countries including China, Japan, Russia and Australia. Prabowo, though, met with US officials on seven occasions, more than any other country. This included a June meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Amman, Jordan, during which Prabowo falsely postured as a defender of the Palestinian people.

Prabowo reiterated this phony stance on Sunday, including a declaration of support for Palestine in his inauguration address. In spite of his own bloody history, he hypocritically claimed: "We will stand against all colonialism and we will defend the interests of oppressed people worldwide."

During his meeting in June with Blinken, however, Prabowo expressed support for a phony ceasefire plan in Gaza proposed by the Biden administration, specifically designed to cover up the fact that the US has armed Israel to the teeth and provided the support necessary for the fascistic Netanyahu regime to wage genocide against the Palestinians.

That Prabowo has felt it necessary to express support for the Palestinians reflects the widespread anger and disgust with Israel's genocide that exists among the Indonesian working class, itself the victim of imperialism and colonialism during the 20th century. Prabowo's support for Washington, and by extension for Israel, demonstrates what it means to be "non-aligned": effectively turning a blind eye to imperialist war and genocide, regardless of claims of sympathy, in order to further the interests of the capitalist class.



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