Ear to Asia podcast

Title: Is Indonesia's labor movement stuck in neutral?

Description: More than a quarter century since landmark democratic reforms, Indonesia's labor movement remains surprisingly subdued. Workers continue to face low wages, poor working conditions, and laws that put employers first, as efforts to organize labor remain encumbered by a mix of nationalist and religious rhetoric, government policy, and the rise of the gig economy. So what will it take to significantly improve workers' ability to organize and fight for their rights? And what are their chances of a better deal under the leadership of the incoming president, Prabowo Subianto? Professor Vedi Hadiz, Director of Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, joins presenter Sami Shah to examine the state of Indonesia's labor movement. An Asia Institute podcast. Produced and edited by profactual.com. Music by audionautix.com.

Sami Shah: The Ear to Asia podcast is made available on the Jakarta Post platform, under agreement between the Jakarta Post and the University of Melbourne.

Sami Shah: Hello, I'm Sami Shah, this is Ear to Asia.

Vedi Hadiz: There is up to now in Indonesia, people who were trained in that 80s and 90s sort of traditions. Some of them are still labor organizers, but their ideas of liberal forms, of social democratic forms of labor unionism then actually find it difficult to link up with rank and file workers who find this all foreign, who have been sort of immersed in Pancasila, and those particular kinds of interpretations of religious doctrine.

Sami Shah: In this episode. Is Indonesia's labor movement stuck in neutral?

Ear to Asia is the podcast from Asia Institute, the Asia research specialists at the University of Melbourne.

More than a quarter century since the fall of Suharto's New Order regime, Indonesia's labor movement remains surprisingly subdued in the face of persistent challenges. In today's more democratic Indonesia, why do workers continue to be plagued by low wages, poor working conditions and laws that put employers first? A number of factors line up against the interests of workers and their ability to

organize. Indonesia's outgoing President Joko Widodo, over his decade in power, has pushed legislation that has led to an erosion of workers rights, all the while touting the nation's founding philosophy of Pancasila, which promotes unity and social justice for all citizens. Labor union efforts to fight what they see as Anti-worker government policy has so far failed in the courts. Then there is the rise of the gig economy, exemplified by Indonesia's ubiquitous ojek, or motorcycle taxi drivers, presenting a more recent challenge despite facing precarious conditions and poor pay. These gig workers are being told by very profitable ride hailing platforms that they are entrepreneurs, captains of their own financial destiny. Meanwhile, as Indonesian society gravitates increasingly towards conservative interpretations of Islam, influential Muslim clerics urge workers to be patient and be resigned to divine will. So what are the social and political impediments to a robust organizing of labor in Indonesia? How does pervasive nationalist or religious rhetoric shape how ordinary Indonesians make sense of their working lives? And under the leadership of incoming President Prabowo Subianto, will workers be able to protect their wages and conditions or even improve their lot. Doyen of Indonesia research and Director of Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne, Professor Vedi Hadiz, joins us to shed light on the current state of Indonesia's labor movement. Welcome back to Ear to Asia, Vedi.

Vedi Hadiz: Good morning Sami.

Sami Shah: So how vital is the labor movement in Indonesia today?

Vedi Hadiz: Well, I would say that, as you mentioned earlier, that it is relatively subdued given the multiple kinds of challenges that it faces. Now, mind you, a lot of economists will point out, and they are correct, that the supply of labor in Indonesia is very large. And if we simply applied a kind of supply and demand kind of framework to understand things, yes, there are economic structural issues that would reduce the bargaining position of workers. However, that's only part of the story. I don't think that is necessarily the determining factor for the sorts of conditions and rights, or at least lack of enforcement of rights, that the Indonesian workers and the Indonesian labor movements have had to work with in recent years. Basically, it is relatively subdued. We have formal freedoms compared to 25 years ago when the authoritarian Suharto regime was in power. There is much greater formal freedom of organization. In fact, there are many, many trade unions, enterprise level federations

and confederations which would not have been possible under the New Order of Suharto, which only recognized one state backed labor union which served really to control the labor force rather than to represent it. Right now, at least, there is the intent amongst these labor unions to try to represent the interests of workers better. But first of all, the laws are not always enforced. In fact, it is not only in the labor area that laws are not well enforced in Indonesia. Indonesia has a host of really good regulations on a lot of things, but they are hardly enforced, and that's partly because of bureaucratic intervention into the everyday sort of business of negotiations, labor organizing and so on, and also of powerful bureaucrats and politicians, which tend to work in favor, of course, of those who are more powerful, and who are able to forge the sorts of alliances that would be useful to dominant political, bureaucratic, and business alliances that you find across Indonesia, from the national down to the local level. And, of course, workers have very little political leverage. Right? In addition to the economic disadvantage that I mentioned earlier.

Sami Shah: Would that political leverage be affected by size, the fact that the workers workforce in Indonesia is so large at this point, will they have more impact as they grow?

Vedi Hadiz: Well, actually, the labor force is, uh, I think it stands at just under 150 million people out of a population of 270 million. So that's a sizable labor force. And in the ‘90s in particular, ‘80s and ‘90s Indonesia focused on a export led industrial strategy that focused on exports from industries that relied on abundant and cheap labor forces, so easily exploitable labor forces. But that strategy kind of met its demise or near demise after the Asian economic crisis of 9798, after which it took a while for the Indonesian manufacturing sector to rise up again. And by that time, the Chinese and other competitors had sort of permeated through the international market. In fact, one of the problems in Indonesia right now is that, again, because of, people say, bureaucratic ineptitude. But I think a lot of this is actually deliberate because of particular kinds of alliances between bureaucrats and businesses and so on. There is a glut of imported, you know, sort of footwear and clothing, garments and so on, particularly from China, which applies pressure on Indonesia's manufacturing industry, which, you know, has just revived over the last decade or so and by extension, makes it more difficult for Indonesian workers to try to find better deals from the employers who feel that they're under pressure from other fronts.

Sami Shah: Well, that does feed nicely into my next question, which is what are the larger employment sectors in Indonesia?

Vedi Hadiz: So, I mean, if you just went to the macro level data, right, you'll find that almost half of the Indonesian workforce actually is in the data captured by the Bureau of Statistics and the particular methodology that they use, almost half are in the services sector, which is, you know, very nebulous. It's everything from low end to very high end services. Right? And then the next is agriculture, which would be between 25 and 30%. I believe it's below 30% now. And actually that represents an important structural change over the last, you know, let's say 50 years, because it's only been relatively recently that the majority of Indonesians were not employed in the agricultural sector. So currently it's just below 30%. And the other sector is is industry, which includes manufacturing at something approximately 22%, 23% of the workforce. And so that is a significant section of the workforce. Now, the problem with that is that a lot of workers in the service sector, especially in the low end of the service sector and also in the agricultural sector, of course, will not be unionized or have working conditions that are easily directed towards union like sorts of activities. So, you know, it's mainly been in the industrial sector that you find unionization has taken place in spite of sort of gradual increases in the minimum wage that has actually been attained in Indonesia over the last two decades or so after Reformasi, there still are a lot of reasons for workers to hesitate about being active in unionism, for reasons that are often unlawful. For example, many trade union leaders at the workplace level find they are often under pressure that they would lose their jobs and, you know, sort of labor union representatives at the enterprise level, sometimes you would find conditions where some of them would be bribed to enter. You know what we call Ibas here? And this sort of, you know, doesn't make unions attractive to a lot of workers, right? So the unionization level, Indonesia is fairly low. But then again, unionization levels all over the world has declined. I mean, I think in Iceland it's still about 90%, but in Australia, I believe it is around 13% or something like that. You know, compared to what it was in the 1960s, that it is extremely low. In Indonesia, the estimates vary wildly, but I think, you know, something around 6% to 8%, something like that would probably be fairly accurate. And that means that, you know, the capacity of the labor unions to represent workers as a collective vis a vis employers, and the state is somewhat limited now in Australia. Of course, you can argue that well, with 13% or whatever it is, you should have a similar kind of problem. But you know, it's not apple and apple. We have a history in Australia of

social democratic trade unionism that is intertwined with the political structure and political culture of the country. It's part of, you know, of the understanding of the way democracy works and human rights and so on. Whereas in Indonesia, you know, these ideas are things that labor unions have to fight for to be associated with them, in addition to their capacity to get good EBA results for their workers.

Sami Shah: So EBA for listeners who aren't aware, is enterprise bargaining agreements, which is what we have here in Australia. So for the workers now you've got these three different groups or organizations impacting them. There's the there's the unions, there's the government, and then there's also capital. Let's focus on the government side of things. Are there pro-worker political parties that are helping, that are aiding, that are giving a voice?

Vedi Hadiz: The quick answer to that is no. And I would say it's not just my opinion. I've asked literally hundreds of workers in Indonesia that same question face to face, and I did not get one positive answer. Now there is one party that claims that it has paid attention to workers and so on. And this is the PKS. That's the Justice and Prosperity Party of Indonesia. And it's sort of Islamic oriented party. In 2009 and 2014, it did approach some of the labor unions to develop a kind of political deal with them, whereby some labor union leaders would be placed in their list of candidates for local legislative seats, and so on. It was not a very successful sort of strategy. I believe that most of the labor union candidates failed to get elected, and therefore two things happened. One, the party felt that, well, maybe it's not that useful to try to gather working class support, although truth be told, they were often placed in positions where they would not get elected. And secondly, the workers themselves felt “We were exploited, the party only used us for their propaganda purposes to show that there’re poor working people,” etc., etc. But in the end, nothing happened in 2014 and 2019 as well, the Gerindra party of the president elect, Prabowo Subianto also developed a kind of political deals with some key labor unions, but also that didn't get anywhere. And if anything, I think that right now, his relationship with the unions that he had managed to, let's say, incorporate into his coalition, or one might say co-opt into his coalition, you know, are not particularly enthusiastic about him anymore. Part of the reason is that his party supported legislation a couple of years ago that potentially hugely diminishes labor rights, including making it easier to dismiss workers to make outsourcing casualisation easier. And they felt betrayed. Actually, all the Indonesian political parties virtually supported this measure, and so

it's not surprising that of the hundreds of workers that I talked to, zero person, literally zero, said that any political party supported them.

Sami Shah: The reality is that the subordination of workers is merged with the Pancasila ideology, the state nationalism and prevalent Islamic doctrines as well. What impact has this had?

Vedi Hadiz: Actually, here's a bit of personal history. In the early 1990s, I did a long research project, actually for my PhD on Indonesian workers and the labor movement under the authoritarian regime, and I published a book about that in 1997. But since then I'd gone on to different topics of research. And then just about, you know, maybe four years or so ago, I thought I'd revisit this because, you know, after 20 years or so of Reformasi, I wanted to see whether there were any differences. Right? I mean, if you looked at just institutional formal arrangements. Yes. Huge differences. Right. There's freedom to organize, et cetera, et cetera. But I wanted to see, really, whether it meant that you had a labor force and a labor movement that actually had greater leverage over policy making and that sort of thing, because it does not necessarily translate in real life, you know. And one of the things I found was that not only were the institutions and the enforcement of laws or lack of enforcement of laws, a problem and informal relations of domination, subordination within enterprises, you know, a problem, you know, issues of bribery and that sort of thing that I mentioned earlier. But there were internal problems within the labor movement itself. And one of them that I've mentioned, and I think that, frankly, a lot of colleagues of mine who might have been working on the labor movement for quite a while, and maybe even some of the trade union leaders and so on.

Vedi Hadiz: Will, you know, to use a very scientific term, be pissed off at me for saying that the workers, by and large, have a have internalized state ideology and in such a way that state ideology has melded with predominant interpretations of Islamic doctrine as propagated by, you know, sort of local and national religious figures related to some of the major Islamic mass organizations, but also some of the fringe ones as well. And it does so in an interesting way in that according to Pancasila, as interpreted by the authoritarian regime in particular, which, by the way, did concoct something called Pancasila, industrial relations in the 1980s, which basically meant workers don't do anything, just follow what the state and your employers say for the sake of economic growth. All right. So they've internalized the

idea that within Indonesian culture, conflict isn't really such a great thing. It doesn't mean that they won't go on strike. It doesn't mean that they won't protest when infringements take place in the workplace, when colleagues are fired arbitrarily and so on. But it does act as a brake. I've talked to, you know, sort of factory level organizers and they say, well, there is this cultural sort of imperative to actually respect the employers as somebody who's provided you with employment. And of course, the government, you know, which has the responsibility to look after the welfare of the people, although they will say this with a considerable degree of skepticism as well.

Vedi Hadiz: But you know where this has sort of had holes in it. Those holes are often filled in by another cultural resource pool, which is religion. And I'm not saying religion as religion with a capital R, where you have a firm consensus about what any particular religion says about anything. I'm talking about how religion has dictates that are interpreted in different ways, and that there are social positions that allow some people to interpret them in ways that are amenable to particular, you know, social and political structures. And so a lot of these, you know, Muslim clerics, you know, have said, all right, you know, be a bit more patient. You know, be thankful for what you've got. Of course, if there's injustice, you have to speak out. But generally God will take care of the believers. And this also acts as a bit of a break, I think, and therefore sometimes I find that at the top level of some of the unions, not all of them, right. But maybe some of the unions that are slightly on the fringe and tend to be a bit more more on the militant side than others, that there is a kind of gap between the rhetoric that they spout, which is often about struggle, etc., and the actual language that's spoken by the workers at the workplace level.

Sami Shah: I want to get back to Pancasila in a moment. But before we do that religion, you mentioned how much of an influence and impact it now has when we talk about the conservative turn in Indonesia. What is that? And how has it impacted this particular sector?

Vedi Hadiz: Well, I mean, a lot of people started talking about the conservative turn in Indonesia around 2010 onwards. And again, it's a good descriptor, you know, of what's happened. But as one of the major people who promoted the idea in the first place understands, but some of the people who have then taken up that term have understood less clearly, is that it's been an historical process. But I'd like to just go

only as far back as the 1980s and 1990s. So across the Muslim world, in fact, across the religious world, not just the Muslim world, there has been a process of what one scholar has called religion-ization in which he means that sort of formalized, often more strict and conservative forms of understanding of religion have codified, have tended to replace sort of more fluid and folk based interpretations of religion. And this, uh, this guy named Picard, not the Star Trek captain.

Sami Shah: But separate Picard. Right?

Vedi Hadiz: Yes. Different Picard. Uh, he said, uh, you know that this has occurred across the world. And across the Muslim world, certainly from the ‘70s. And this has to do partly with petrodollars being available to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. In the ‘70s, versions of Islam that came out of there became propagated across a lot of the Muslim world, because a lot of Muslim scholars, students and so on went to the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia to study religion, came back to their own countries and said, all this folk stuff is wrong, okay. And so from the 80s and 90s, you can see in Indonesia that there has been a displacement of the more syncretic sort of folk types of of Islam. And what this has done really is to in places where in the 1960s, yeah, syncretic forms of Islam were predominant, you'll see that it is still fairly strong, but there are large pockets of even Salafi type of Islam which you hardly ever saw in Indonesia in the 1970s.

Sami Shah: So has that impacted the way the workers see their relationship with employers, with the state?

Vedi Hadiz: So what I'm saying is that this religion-ization has been mainstreamed. Right? And therefore more codified, rigid, strict understandings have displaced more pluralistic fluid sort of understandings of of religious doctrine. Some people say that's a good thing, but the effect of it really, in terms of the everyday lives of workers, is that on a day to day basis or on a regular basis, they are exposed to religious teachings that represent this more codified form of Islam, which has now, because the organizations which are propagating them have often been co-opted into power themselves, have tended to speak the language of moderation, self-restraint, uh, discourses that can be melded better into the state ideology of Pancasila, seems to have at this moment a predominant position.

Sami Shah: You're listening to Ear to Asia from Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. And just a reminder to listeners about Asia Institute's online publication on Asia and its societies, politics, and cultures. It's called the Melbourne Asia Review. It's free to read and it's open access at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. You'll find articles by some of our regular Ear to Asia guests and by many others. Plus, you can catch recent episodes of Ear to Asia at the Melbourne Asia Review website, which again you can find at melbourneasiareview.edu.au. I'm Sami Shah and I'm joined by Director of Asia Institute and doyen of Indonesia research, Professor Vedi Hadiz, and we're discussing Indonesia's labor movement. Let's get a little bit of clarity here on some of the terminology, because Pancasila might not be familiar to people who aren't very well versed in Indonesian politics and history. What is it and what was its original Purpose.

Vedi Hadiz: Well, you know, it comes from Sanskrit -- Pancasila -- five principles and the five principles of fairly vague. It ranges from belief in one God, unity, national unity, and social justice. You know, so, you know, frankly, you can put anything into it that you like. And the history of it really was that in 1945, when they were talking about an independent Indonesian state, because the Japanese were about to surrender to the allies, and they were afraid that the Dutch would come back, which they did with the British, that we need to have a kind of state ideology, you know, to bind us all together across an archipelago of 17,000 islands with hundreds of ethnic groups multi-religious, multicultural, etc. And Pancasila basically was the compromise. Why? Because it could fit everybody's idea of what a future state would look like and not be excluded from it, so that that was the history of it. And then under the New Order of Suharto, it developed into basically a state ideology that became more and more associated with ideas of authentic Indonesian culture. And therefore, if you are not Pancasila, you were against Indonesian culture, right? Or you were the other and things that were the other included communism. Of course, the New Order emerged out of the destruction of communism in Indonesia in the mid 1960s. By the way, the communists in the 50s and 60s had the largest trade union federation in Indonesia. So it was actually beneficial to the new order to destroy the trade union movement. So during the new order, you know, this sort of ideas of authentic culture became more and more codified, became more and more silly in a lot of ways. In the mid 1980s, there were laws that stated that all social and political organizations had to have Pancasila at the top of their constitution, and this meant that everything you know, from communism to social democracy to liberalism and so

on was basically foreign. So and what was Pancasila? Pancasila was the integration of state and society.

Sami Shah: So vague enough to be whatever it needed to be.

Vedi Hadiz: That's right. But it took a political role of surveilling ideas and suppressing civil society based movements on the basis that if they were against the state, they can't be Pancasila.

Sami Shah: So this was used then to suppress, as you've described, the labor organizing systems as well. For labor, this translated into rigid systems of control.

Vedi Hadiz: Oh yeah. Yeah, yeah. Well, I mean, uh, a book I wrote. A few years after Reformasi, I think it introduced the idea of oligarchy as a structural relations of power that continued to dictate the workings of Indonesian politics, even though Indonesia had become a democracy. So the idea in that book was that an oligarchy, which constituted a kind of fusion of interests between the top levels of the political bureaucracy and big business, had been nurtured under the new order. The new order had partly done this by putting together, you know, sort of an ideological political infrastructure, which included excluding and basically marginalizing any voices of dissent that this oligarchy then actually survived the change into democracy. Why? Because if you look at the Indonesian political parties in the beginning and even today, there are very few of the major political parties, almost none that are not under the dictates of an oligarchic faction.

Sami Shah: Well, I was going to come to exactly that, the present day or close enough to it. Joko Widodo or Jokowi came into the presidency as a clean skin, as someone who was not associated with the oligarchs, who seemed to be running Indonesia in the background. Well, that was his very good social media team.

Sami Shah: And therein lies the question then what was the impact? Was there any benefit to the local workers?

Vedi Hadiz: Well, I mean, ironically, actually the bits and pieces that the workers gained the most during the 26 years of Reformasi occurred just a few years before Jokowi came to power. And there was a conjuncture of several things that made that

possible, which involved things like greater access to social security, health benefits, and so on. This all happened before Jokowi in relation to workers. But under Jokowi, if anything, especially late -- the late Jokowi period, there has been a revival in sort of the rhetoric and also the practices of controlling workers rather than, you know, having them thrive and flourish and become a partner in the sort of development and political process. So, first of all, I have always taken the opinion that it was incorrect to say that Jokowi was independent of the oligarchy. He may have been a little furniture businessperson in Central Java, but very early on he had links with local political elites. His business, his furniture business involved a partnership with Lieutenant General Luhut Pandjaitan, who is now his right hand man in government, himself a wealthy businessman with interests in forestry, mining, etc. And it was through these relationships that he got catapulted into local politics and Central Java, and then to Jakarta and then the national level.

Vedi Hadiz: Frankly, he had no political party, he had no money. It would have been impossible for him to be that sort of player at the national level without these sorts of backing. So I would submit that it was ridiculous to think that he was free of oligarchic interests, and that it was entirely unsurprising that gradually, over the course of his presidency, these alliances became more and more clear, and that he was actually deliberately designing them in such a way to sustain and secure the business and political future of his own family. And from that point of view, there is nothing pro-worker about his outlook. In fact, late in his presidency, an omnibus law came out which included a, quote unquote, job creation law, which I alluded to earlier, which actually makes it far more easier for workers to be dismissed. That encouraged outsourcing and also, by the way, practically demolished all of the settings that the legal system had in terms of monitoring the environmental compliance of Indonesian businesses in the mining sector and the forestry sector, where businesses were his allies, his main donors and so on are entrenched in.

Sami Shah: Indonesia, cannot and is not isolated from the rest of the world. What is the influence of liberal or social democratic discourse about workers rights and workers conditions, as advocated by NGOs and international labor organizations and such having on the local workforce.

Vedi Hadiz: Well, actually, you know, if you go back to the 1960s, you know, when the New Order sort of wanted to establish an alternative trade union movement that

was not heavily influenced by leftist ideas. So the German foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, took a very important role in setting up the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower and also in setting up a lot of the institutions governing state-capital-labor relations in the early new order. But around 1973 or so, the new order then decided that, well, actually. “Okay, thank you very much for all of this help. Now we need to put together institutions that would be helpful to our agenda,” which was to actually suppress societal dissent in the interests of economic growth, which in itself, you know, may not have been offensive to some people except for the fact that more and more that economic growth and there was economic growth came together with wide scale corruption, abuse of power, human rights infringements, etc., etc., and the concentration of wealth around the cronies of Suharto and then eventually the children of Suharto, which then, of course, you know, sort of created a lot of public animosity against them, which spilled over during the Asian economic crisis in 1998. Having said that, labor organizations, you know, like the AFL-CIO, European ones, Australian ones still had connections in the 80s with a range of Indonesian NGOs.

Vedi Hadiz: The ACTU worked very closely with the sole state backed labor union in Indonesia, the SPSI. In fact, I remember having arguments with Martin Ferguson, who was the head of the ACTU at that time. And I said to him that, “You were supporting state authoritarianism and control over labor.” And he said, “Well, they're the only option.” And I said, “well, why don't you back some of the independent organising bodies that were developing at the time, unrecognised by the state being suppressed, people going to jail and so forth.” And I think he just thought that that would be too messy and not very good in terms of the relationship with the Indonesian government. And I believe that that was the line of the Australian government at the time to which, you know, understandable. But, you know, I was a bit annoyed that that was being done under the pretext of introducing labor rights knowledge and so on to Indonesians, whilst in reality a lot of these were being subsumed as well by the SPSI and the institutions of state power to sort of say, “Well, you know, we're not totally against these sorts of ideas. All right. I mean, we do believe in labor rights, except when you're bloody fight us.”

Sami Shah: So a lip service?

Vedi Hadiz: Yeah. Lip service. Yeah, but, you know, things don't go as intended always. I think that there is up to now, people who were trained in that 80s and 90s

sort of traditions who actually believe this. Some of them are still labor organizers and so on. But I think that their ideas of, you know, sort of liberal forms of social democratic forms of labor unionism, as I've alluded to earlier, then, actually find it difficult to link up with rank and file workers who find this all foreign, who have been sort of immersed in Pancasila and those particular kinds of of interpretations of religious doctrine that I mentioned. This is what they were raised with in school, outside of school, you know, in their everyday lives, you know. And then suddenly you meet a bunch of people that says, “Well, actually, there's these sorts of things as well.” And it's kind of foreign, you know. I mean, some workers take it up and they become activists themselves, but it is a -- what is it? It is a kind of barrier in terms of reaching workers. And frankly, I've seen this happen not just in Indonesia, but in other countries as well.

Sami Shah: Let's move now to the gig worker. It's been something we've seen as a rising workforce labor force in many countries. Indonesia is again, not immune to that either. How much of the workforce now is in gig work?

Vedi Hadiz: Well, it depends on which statistics you go by.

Sami Shah: But I suppose the first question, a better question, would be what kind of gig work is available?

Vedi Hadiz: Well, as in Australia, you know, there are different kinds of gig workers. There are gig workers that, you know, I don't know. They stay at home and they offer particular services to big companies, maybe, you know, work on their websites and so on from home. And that's a gig worker, right? But like in Australia, you also have, you know, these Uber Eats people and so on. You know, those are gig workers now in Indonesia you have both as well. But the predominant kind of gig worker is in the transport and sort of delivery services, courier services. Now, overwhelmingly they are male because it involves, you know, transport, you know, motorcycles and so on in sort of often very inhospitable urban conditions, and road safety and so on is not something that Indonesian cities are very renowned for. So if you go by government statistics, there'd be about 2 million or so people working as gig workers in Indonesia. Frankly, I think that's an underestimation because in Central Java, I do remember meeting a bunch of male factory workers who supplemented their income as ojek drivers a motorcycle taxi driver. So where did they go into these statistics?

You know, I don't know. So I think that it's still something that we don't know. I think really the size of. But clearly it is growing. And there are a couple of implications for that. One is that they are precarious. They don't have job security. They don't have laws that protect their welfare, their rights. If they get into an accident on the roadside. They'd be dependent on family and friends. I mean, companies will have very few obligations to take care of them. And secondly, they are not categorized as employees. They are categorized as independent workers or even as entrepreneurs. Which means that they don't have the right to unionize.

Sami Shah: Do they buy into that categorization?

Vedi Hadiz: Uh, yeah. One of the interesting things I found when I did work with a former PhD student of mine is that they actually a lot of them, not all of them. A lot of them actually like that category for a couple of reasons. One is that they buy into the idea, well, I can control my own time when I do my work. And then when you talk to them further, they go, well, actually, if I want to make enough money and if I want the bonuses that are built into the system that I've signed into, I've got to work really, really long hours.

Sami Shah: Because for ojek drivers, also, there is there's a duopoly, right, of the apps that they're able to get on Go-Jek and grab.

Vedi Hadiz: Basically with the app based drivers. The company that runs most of the market is Gojek, Jek. Gojek is a huge conglomerate because it has now merged with an e-commerce outfit called Tokopedia, and so it's sort of parent company is now called GoTo. Right? Gojek and Tokopedia. So Gojek was established by the current Indonesian Minister of Education. So it does have a virtual monopoly. It doesn't have doesn't just have Gojek motorcycle drivers, but it also has GoCar which is like taxi app based drivers. But the key thing is that workers then who are in that industry buy into the fact that, “Oh, you know, you're our partner. So it's profits that we're dividing with you, not a wage.” Whereas actually, you know, they enter into a system in which, again, they have very few rights. And the agreement is often sort of rigged in ways that would ensure that they would do a lot more work in order to survive than they had that they had imagined. And the unions have very little that they can do with them, although some unions have tried to establish a base workers division, but really the state doesn't recognize their activities.

Sami Shah: That isn't to say that the ojek drivers haven't formed support groups, which is different from unions, but are they? How different are they and what's the main focus there?

Vedi Hadiz: Okay, so they realize, even though they think they're entrepreneurs, that, “Oh, we are vulnerable, aren't we? So we better do something, you know, to to help ourselves.” Now remember that Gojek drivers, unlike factory workers, don't have a locus of work. Right? They don't congregate in the same place every day for, you know, eight, nine hours a day. And so they don't meet the same people all the time. They're all over the city, you know, that's the nature of their work. At times, they will stay for a couple of hours in little sort of outposts, you know, where maybe 5 or 6 of them will hang out. And from these, I think, developed kind of, uh, collectives. And these collectives are not unions. They're more like mutual help societies. So occasionally they would have an activity that would include a meal. Maybe sometimes there would be a religious element to it. They would invite a religious preacher to say something, and they would set up a fund whereby if somebody had an accident or somebody died, they would contribute to to the family. But it's not a union. It's more of a mutual help society. And it hasn't developed into something that then could maybe transition into being a union. Why? Because these people think that, you know, they are of the opinion that, well, we're not workers and therefore we can't unionize. And this is what we do to help each other.

Sami Shah: Subianto Prabowo will soon become Indonesia's eighth president, given his close ties with Suharto's New Order. What can Indonesia's workers expect from him and his administration?

Vedi Hadiz: Not much. Uh, I mean, he's got a lot of nationalist, populist rhetoric. In the past, as I mentioned, I think for completely opportunistic reasons, they did approach some unions, you know, tried to make a political deal with them, but that didn't come to much. And I think he's now in in a mindset where he thinks that “I could get elected, I can run the country and so on without any support whatsoever from the labor unions.” So I think the labor unions will have little leverage with him. Some of them will try to get by in a position here and there, I suppose. And as a way of also augmenting their authority over, over the membership. But in reality, I think that the unions will have a hard time bargaining with somebody whose social origins

was at the heart of the New Order, oligarchy being a New Order general, and also the son in law of Suharto himself.

Sami Shah: How does Indonesia compare then currently to its neighboring states, Vietnam, other countries in the area?

Vedi Hadiz: Years ago, I did some quick research in China about workers there. Of course, you know, unions are recognized and it's a communist state. Right? But it doesn't mean that workers rights are being upheld because the labor unions are an appendage of the party, which is an appendage of the Politburo, which is an appendage of the supreme leader. And often you found that. And I found this interesting, actually, that there were little, little NGOs run by lawyers often that help workers, you know, when they had problems with employers, when they got into accidents. But that's very limited in what you can do. Right. So it's basically, you know, you're providing a band aid, right, to injuries that may require something more than a band aid. Similarly, in Vietnam, the labor unions, of course, are very linked to the ruling Communist Party. I remember being in a meeting with the Asian and African sort of trade union representatives, and I came as an observer, as an academic, and I engaged in some of the discussions. This was a while ago, but still I think it holds. The Vietnamese delegation didn't say a word. I think that a lot of the labor controls and so on that you have in Indonesia, you might have in a different way, and maybe even at worse levels in other countries. Now, in places like Thailand, this long history of trade unionist sort of activity going back to the 70s and 80s, and they used to be sort of conflicts between unions that represented state workers and private workers. It seems to me now that in the era of Thaksin and following Thaksin, that the labor unions have not really had, you know, a position of bargaining position with the powers that be. The mobilization of masses, which have often taken place when the elites have confronted each other, have not relied mainly on labor unions.

Sami Shah: Thank you so much, Vedi.

Vedi Hadiz: Thank you so much, Sami. I hope I didn't talk too much.

Sami Shah: Our guest has been Professor Vedi, Hadiz, Director of Asia Institute at the University of Melbourne. Ear to Asia is brought to you by Asia Institute of the

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