

Letter from Editor

Academic Life in Contemporary Indonesia: Inequality, Repression, and the Illusion of Freedom

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SUBJECT

Social science

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To be an academic in Indonesia today is to work within an increasingly acute paradox. On the one hand, national law recognises academic freedom, the freedom of the academic rostrum, and scholarly autonomy as essential elements of higher education. Law No. 12 of 2012 on Higher Education, for instance, defines academic freedom as the freedom of the academic community to pursue and develop knowledge through education, research, and community service (Republik Indonesia, 2012). On the other hand, the lived experiences of many lecturers, researchers, and students suggest that such freedom is often conditional. Academics appear to be free so long as they do not challenge power, touch particular economic-political interests, criticise the security apparatus, or disturb the government's public image. This condition

may be understood as a form of "illusory freedom": freedom that exists as a legal norm, yet remains fragile as a socio-political practice.

This paradox cannot be understood merely as an internal problem of universities. It is connected to three interrelated crises: income inequality among lecturers, repression of academic criticism, and the weakening of academic freedom across two recent political periods, namely the administration of Joko Widodo and the early period of Prabowo Subianto's presidency. Together, these crises have produced an academic ecosystem that is administratively productive but poorly protected. Universities are continuously pushed to generate publications, accreditation outcomes, rankings, and performance indicators, yet they do not always provide a secure environment for the pursuit of truth. In such circumstances, the university risks being transformed from an autonomous space for the production of knowledge into an educational bureaucracy subordinated to the logics of the market and state power.

The first crisis concerns the material inequality experienced by academics. In Indonesia, lecturers are often positioned as "servants" who are expected to work primarily out of moral commitment, rather than as knowledge workers entitled to decent wages, social protection, and humane working conditions. PUSKAPOL UI (2026)

highlights how the privatisation of higher education has reshaped lecturers' employment status, including the emergence of university-employed lecturers who are not civil servants and whose salary structures are not always clear. In some cases, lecturers' basic salaries fall below the provincial minimum wage, particularly in private universities or institutions without a strong financial base. This is not simply a matter of salary figures, but of power relations. Lecturers who are economically vulnerable are more easily subjected to university bureaucratic demands, less able to refuse excessive workloads, and more cautious in expressing criticism.

Income inequality among lecturers has also become visible in recent legal debates. In a Constitutional Court hearing in April 2026, the Constitutional and Administrative Law Society argued that the absence of a clear minimum income standard for lecturers threatened both lecturers' welfare and the quality of higher education (Mahkamah Konstitusi Republik Indonesia, 2026). This statement underlines that, without a clear minimum income threshold, many lecturers are compelled to seek additional work in order to meet their basic needs. As a result, the time available for research, scholarly development, student supervision, and public engagement becomes limited. This situation demonstrates that lecturers' welfare is not a private household matter, but a public issue that affects the quality of higher education and the future of national knowledge production.

Data on workload further strengthen this picture. Karso (2025) notes that the average working hours of lecturers at public universities reached 69.64 hours per week throughout 2024, far exceeding the weekly working standards commonly used in labour policy. Karso also shows that 76.5 per cent of lecturers held additional jobs beyond their academic duties, including consultancy, extra teaching, project-based research, writing, and informal work. These figures are significant because they show that lecturers are not only confronted with inadequate pay, but also with "time poverty". They are required to teach, conduct research, supervise students, perform community service, handle accreditation administration, pursue publications, complete reporting systems, and simultaneously seek additional income. Under such conditions, academic freedom loses its material foundation.

Lecturers' welfare is directly related to the quality of campus democracy. Ideally, academics should have the time, economic security, and autonomy necessary for critical thought. Yet when lecturers depend on incentives, projects, structural positions, employment contracts, certification, or the goodwill of university leaders, criticism becomes a high-risk act. Arif (2026) emphasises the need for a professional minimum wage for lecturers that takes into account decent living needs, academic qualifications, Tridharma responsibilities, research costs, self-development, and regional disparities. In other words, it is not enough for academics to be granted formal freedom to speak. They must also be provided with the material conditions that enable intellectual courage. Without economic security, academic freedom will always remain negotiable, deferrable, or sacrificable for the sake of survival.

The second crisis is the repression of criticism. Within the literature on contemporary Indonesian politics, the Joko Widodo administration is often understood as a period of democratic regression. Power and Warburton (2020) argue that Indonesia's democratic stagnation developed into a broader pattern of regression, particularly through the weakening of opposition, elite consolidation, and the narrowing of civic space. Mietzner (2020) similarly identifies the emergence of "authoritarian innovations" in Indonesia through the restriction of electoral competition, the use of identity politics,

and the strengthening of illiberal tendencies within the executive. This regression has not necessarily appeared in the form of cancelled elections or the total closure of civic space. More often, it has taken the form of gradual tightening: the use of vague legal provisions, the criminalisation of criticism, hacking, digital intimidation, restrictions on discussions, and the production of a climate of fear.

The case of Robertus Robet in 2019 is one important example. *Scholars at Risk* (2019) recorded that the sociology lecturer at Universitas Negeri Jakarta was arrested after criticising a plan to expand the military's role in civilian offices. The case demonstrates how academic-political criticism can be processed through criminal law instruments. In 2020, a discussion organised by the Constitutional Law Society at the Faculty of Law, Universitas Gadjah Mada, on presidential dismissal was cancelled after organisers and speakers received threats, including death threats, account hacking, and intimidation against the academics involved (Butt, 2020; *Scholars at Risk*, 2020). These two cases reveal a broader pattern: constitutional issues that should legitimately be discussed on campus can be distorted into matters of security threat or treason.

Under Prabowo Subianto, whose administration began only in October 2024, the historical record is, of course, not yet as extensive as that of the Jokowi era. Nevertheless, early cases suggest continuity in patterns of repression. In April 2026, Saiful Mujani was reported to the Jakarta Metropolitan Police on allegations of treason or incitement in connection with his remarks about President Prabowo (CNN Indonesia, 2026). Saiful Mujani denied that his statement constituted an invitation to treason, describing it instead as part of political discussion. The case illustrates how thin the boundary often becomes, in the eyes of complainants and law-enforcement actors, between political criticism, academic analysis, and criminal accusation. In a democratic society, criticism of the president should be treated as part of public participation, rather than swiftly drawn into the criminal domain.

The case of Feri Amsari reinforces a similar tendency. The constitutional law scholar was reported for allegedly spreading false information and inciting the public. The Institute for Criminal Justice Reform regarded the report as an indication of the use of criminal law to respond to public criticism, as well as a threat to freedom of expression (Tempo.co, 2026a). Ubedilah Badrun was also reported after criticising Prabowo-Gibran. Government responses to these cases have tended to be ambiguous. On the one hand, officials such as Yusril Ihza Mahendra have stated that academics are free to criticise the government. On the other hand, legal reporting processes continue and produce a chilling effect among other academics (CNN Indonesia, 2026). Natalius Pigai has also stated that criticism by academics is a constitutional right, while still placing limits on forms of expression deemed to disturb stability (Tempo.co, 2026b). This ambiguity reveals the heart of the problem: the state may declare that criticism is protected, while legal mechanisms, police reports, and social pressure can still effectively silence it.

Academic repression does not always come directly from the president or ministers. It often operates through a more complex ecosystem: political volunteers, mass organisations, individual complainants, police officers, buzzers, university leaders, and a defensive bureaucratic culture. This is what makes modern repression appear "legal" and "participatory". Power does not always need to silence dissent through formal prohibition. It is sufficient to allow criticism to be overwhelmed by police reports, threats, hacking, summonses, or accusations of being anti-state. The effect is a chilling effect: other academics learn that speaking too clearly may invite personal and professional

costs. In the long term, the university becomes a space that appears administratively vibrant but is impoverished in terms of intellectual courage.

The third crisis is the constriction of academic freedom. The available data indicate a consistent decline. Scholars at Risk and the Indonesian Caucus for Academic Freedom note that, since March 2017, there has been widespread pressure and targeted action by state and university actors to punish or silence dissent, inquiry, and academic expression (Scholars at Risk & Indonesian Caucus for Academic Freedom, 2022). The report also records that Indonesia's Academic Freedom Index score declined from 0.75 in 2000 to 0.65 in 2021 (Scholars at Risk & Indonesian Caucus for Academic Freedom, 2022). The Indonesian Institute later noted that the 2025 Academic Freedom Index gave Indonesia a score of 0.59 out of 1.00, with the decline occurring particularly in campus integrity, academic expression, and cultural expression. These findings suggest that the weakening of academic freedom is not a set of isolated incidents, but a structural tendency (Mughtar et al., 2025).

When mapped according to political period, the Jokowi era may be understood as a phase in which the narrowing of academic space became institutionalised. During this period, Indonesia continued to hold regular elections and maintained formal political pluralism. However, civic space and freedom of expression weakened. Freedom House (2025) classifies Indonesia as "partly free", with a score of 56 out of 100. Its assessment identifies several problems, including systemic corruption, conflict in Papua, and the politicisation of defamation and blasphemy laws (Freedom House, 2025). Although Freedom House data do not specifically measure academic freedom, they are important because academic freedom does not exist in a vacuum. It depends on the quality of civil liberties, legal protection, institutional independence, and society's willingness to tolerate dissent.

The early Prabowo period indicates continuity, and potentially intensification, particularly in matters related to security and militarisation. Reuters (2025a) reported that human rights groups urged parliament to reject revisions to the Indonesian Military Law because they were considered likely to open greater space for active military personnel to occupy civilian posts. The government defended the revisions, but activists warned of the risks of abuse of power, human rights violations, and impunity (Reuters, 2025a). The relevance for academics is clear: Indonesia's history shows that the strengthening of security logic often goes hand in hand with the narrowing of critical space, especially when universities and student movements are viewed as sources of political disruption.

The "Indonesia Gelap" protests in February 2025 also showed that students and activists became important actors in public criticism from the beginning of the Prabowo administration. Reuters (2025b) reported demonstrations by students and activists in several cities against budget cuts, concerns over teachers' welfare, potential increases in tuition fees, and the expansion of the military's role in civilian work. Meanwhile, Associated Press (2025) reported Amnesty International's findings that, in 2024, there were hundreds of arrests during public protests, violence against demonstrators, and physical and digital attacks against journalists and activists. These data are important for understanding the Prabowo period not as a wholly new beginning, but as a continuation of a repressive ecosystem already formed under the previous administration.

From these three crises, it becomes clear that academic freedom cannot be separated from the political economy of higher education. Lecturers who are poorly paid, overburdened with administration, and dependent on contracts or incentives are more

easily disciplined. Universities that pursue accreditation, rankings, and publications may become bureaucracies of compliance rather than communities dedicated to the pursuit of truth. A state that views criticism as a threat to stability will regard critical academics not as assets to democracy, but as political risks. In this configuration, academic freedom becomes a permission that may be withdrawn at any time.

For this reason, the solution cannot be limited to advising academics to be “prudent” in expressing criticism. The problem is not merely the communicative style of academics, but the structure that makes criticism easily criminalised and academic welfare readily neglected. Reform must include the establishment of a decent minimum income standard for lecturers, legal protection for academic expression, restrictions on the use of vague legal provisions, independent mechanisms for handling violations of academic freedom, and the strengthening of university autonomy from political and security-sector intervention. Without these measures, universities will become institutions for producing degrees, performance reports, and policy legitimacy, rather than spaces for free thought.

Thus, to be an academic in Indonesia today is to undertake intellectual labour under conditions that are not fully free. Academics are asked to produce knowledge, yet they are not always given adequate time or decent pay. They are asked to contribute to the nation, yet they may be reported to the police when that contribution takes the form of criticism. They are guaranteed academic freedom by law, yet they face risks when they use that freedom to scrutinise power. This is where the illusion of freedom lies: freedom exists in documents, but is restrained by inequality, repression, and fear.

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