

Indonesia Overview

Updated June 2008

- [Environment](#)
- [Peoples](#)
- [History](#)
- [Governance](#)
- [Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples](#)

Environment

The Republic of Indonesia is a sprawling archipelago of nearly 14,000 islands, which divides into two tiers. The main islands of the more heavily populated southern tier include Sumatra, Java, Bali and Timor. The northern tier includes Kalimantan (most of Borneo), Sulawesi, the Moluccas and Papua (the western half of New Guinea). Sumatra lies west and south of peninsular Malaysia and Singapore across the narrow Strait of Malacca. Kalimantan, the Indonesian section of Borneo, is bounded to the north by Sarawak, Sabah and Brunei. North of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi is the Celebes Sea and beyond that the Philippines. Indonesia's geographic position has made it a gateway for human migration throughout history.

Peoples

Main languages: Bahasa Indonesia (official), Javanese, Sundanese, etc.

Main religions: Islam, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism

Main minority groups: Javanese 85.9 million (41.7%), Sundanese 31.7 million (15.4%), Malay 7 million (3.4%), Madurese 6.8 million (3.3%), Batak 6.2 million (3.0%), Minangkabau 5.6 million (2.7%), Betawi 5.2 million (2.5%), Buginese 5.2 million (2.5%), Bantenese 4.3 million (2.1%), Banjarese 3.5 million (1.7%), Balinese 3.1 million (1.5%), Sasak 2.7 million (1.3%), Makassarese 2.1 million (1.0%), Cirebon 1.9 million (0.9%), Chinese 1.9 million (0.9%), Acehnese 890,000 (0.43%), Torajan 762,000 (0.37 %), etc. (Indonesia Census, 2000)

Apart from Papua, whose indigenous groups remained for the most part in isolation, the remainder of the archipelago was, over two millennia, subjected to successive waves of cultural and religious influences. The transmission and absorption of these were, however, not uniform, which has contributed to the ethnic diversity of modern Indonesia.

Even so, more than 85 per cent of Indonesians consider themselves to be Muslim, making Indonesia nominally the largest Muslim nation in the world. Indonesia is linguistically extremely diverse. West of

Java, the majority language group is the Malayo-Polynesian family of more than 250 languages, usually distinguished into 16 major groups. Four of the 16 groups of the Malayo-Polynesian family are Malayan. One of the four is Riau Malayian, the primary literary language of Indonesia, which in modernized form is Bahasa Indonesia, the official language of Indonesia.

The larger islands support several ethno-linguistic groups. Central Java is the homeland of the predominant Javanese ethnic group, members of which have migrated over time to many of the other inhabited islands in the archipelago. East Java also contains substantial numbers of Balinese and Madurese from the islands of Bali and Madura, the Balinese being distinctive for having maintained a Hindu-based religion while the other Malay peoples of the archipelago adopted Islam. On the island of Bali itself, about 92 per cent of the population is Hindu. West Java also has a large Sundanese population, who are similar to the Lampung peoples of South Sumatra. Java supports more than half of Indonesia's total population.

The economically important island of Sumatra contains a number of significant ethno-linguistic groups besides Javanese. These include the strongly Islamic Acehnese of north Sumatra; Minangkabau, a Muslim group noted for its matriarchal structure and tradition of commerce and trading; and Batak, a half-dozen related tribes, many of which have become Christianized. Kalimantan is dominated by Dayak, Murut, coastal Malay peoples and ethnic Chinese.

The Moluccas are inhabited by peoples who were exposed to Islam and Christianity at around the same time, in the sixteenth century, but managed a peaceful coexistence between the two faiths at community level until the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998, when there was brutal communal fighting. Sulawesi is inhabited mainly by Muslim Buginese and Makasarese in the south, and Christianized Minahasans and Manadonese in the north. Papua is home to some 800,000 indigenous people divided into many hundreds of groupings. The names of smaller islands, or clusters of islands, are often coterminous with the ethno-linguistic groups.

Ahmadiyah Muslims number between 200,000 and 2 million, according to media reports. In many ways the life of Ahmaddiyas conforms to Islam, although there are significant differences between orthodox Muslims and Ahmaddiyas. Orthodox Muslims claim that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the Ahmaddiya sect, proclaimed himself as a prophet, thereby rejecting a fundamental tenet of Islam - Khatem-e-Nabowat (a belief in the finality of the Prophet Mohammad). Such extremist Islamist organizations as the Islamic Defenders' Front have criticized Ahmadiyahs for heresy and launched violent attacks on them.

History

Humans may have inhabited parts of today's Indonesia from between 2 million to 500,000 years ago, but most Indonesians today are of Austronesian stock whose ancestors may have migrated into this part of the world in waves, starting perhaps from Taiwan some 4,000 years ago, displacing in the process an already existing population of Papuan people.

The main islands of Sumatra and Java had flourishing pre-colonial empires and long-established commercial links with China and India, Asia Minor and Europe. In 1511, the Portuguese captured Malacca, which controlled the sea lanes between India and China. The Portuguese fought the Spanish and local sultanates to establish armed forts and trading factories in the archipelago. The Portuguese held on to East Timor until the Indonesian invasion of 1975 (see Timor Leste), but elsewhere, in the early seventeenth century, they were pushed aside by the Dutch, who set up a monopolistic trading company and empire based in Batavia (present-day Jakarta).

The Dutch gained control of the coastal trading enclaves throughout the archipelago and developed mining and plantation agriculture. The Dutch largely ignored the interiors of the islands and ruled through alliances with local sultans. Only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did the Dutch seek to unify control, greatly extending plantation agriculture, based on forced labour, and repatriating huge profits to the Netherlands.

Chinese immigration was encouraged to provide intermediaries between the colonial authorities and the indigenous peoples. The Dutch were ousted by the Japanese at the beginning of the Second World War. The Japanese installed Sukarno and Hatta, leaders of the Indonesian nationalist pro-independence movement, in nominal power. In 1945, the Indonesians proclaimed independence. However, after the defeat of Japan, the Dutch sought to re-establish their rule, forcing the Java-based nationalists to fight a four-year war of independence. The Netherlands finally recognized Indonesian independence in 1949.

Indonesia's history since independence has been tumultuous, as its leaders have attempted to deal with its ethnic diversity, sheer size, lack of internal political cohesion and impoverished peasantry. Indonesia had military and political confrontations with Malaysia and the UK over the creation of the eastern Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak and the Sultanate of Brunei on the island of Borneo, sharing the island with the Indonesian province of Kalimantan.

Indonesia confronted the Dutch over the forced incorporation of Irian Jaya (West Irian) into Indonesia and the Portuguese over East Timor (see East Timor). There have been rebellions on the provinces of West Java, Aceh Central and North Sumatra, Papua, East Timor, North Sulawesi and the Moluccas; and recurrent outbreaks of anti-Chinese violence.

To counterbalance the political strength of the army and the militant Islamic political parties in the 1950s, Sukarno, Indonesia's first President, encouraged the re-emergence and political strength of the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI). In 1965, left-wing military officers and some elements of the PKI attempted a coup, which was quickly suppressed by elite army units under General Suharto. The army launched a massive witch-hunt for PKI members and sympathizers, which saw the slaughter of an estimated 500,000 people, including many ethnic Chinese. Suharto was installed as President, a position he held until 1998. During his administration, the military, better known by its acronym ABRI, exercised a great deal of political power, enjoying special civic privileges and responsibilities, including unelected seats in Parliament and local legislatures, in addition to its defence and security roles.

The Asian economic crisis of 1997–8 brought Indonesia to its knees. Popular discontent with the Suharto administration led to mass protests and widespread rioting that forced Suharto to step down in May 1998. This was followed by a quick succession of changes and reforms towards a more open and democratic society, a process referred to as 'Reformasi'. East Timor voted to regain its independence after 1999, and despite violence and serious obstacles in its path was allowed to do so. Islamic fundamentalism seemed to gain strength during this period of upheavals, including an upsurge in confessional attacks in different parts of the country, and terrorist bombings in Bali and Jakarta.

There eventually followed in 2004 Indonesia's first direct presidential election, and changes which were to reduce, though not extinguish the military's political power. A series of calamitous natural disasters have struck Indonesia in recent years, but at least one of them, the 2004 tsunami, may have contributed to the 2005 settlement of the separatist conflict involving the Acehese minority.

Governance

Since the end of the Suharto presidency in 1998, Indonesia has been moving towards a more liberal

democratic system, with increased human rights provisions and mechanisms and other major political and structural changes: presidential elections in 2004 were the first where the president and vice-president were directly elected.

The constitution contains a number of human rights guarantees. There are a number of human rights institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission (KOMNASHAM), and a human rights court set up in 2000. Despite some good work in the past by KOMNASHAM, the government appears to be unable to address very serious human rights violations such as extra-judicial killings, torture and other abuses by the security forces, which often target minorities in restive provinces. Corruption – including within the judicial system – and inadequate training, resources and leadership, all combine to weaken the potential legal and constitutional protections. The human rights court's effectiveness is limited because cases involving military personnel fall instead under the jurisdiction of the Indonesian Military Court.

Recent attempts to address past breaches have encountered setbacks. The establishment of a special Truth and Reconciliation Commission to investigate human rights violations since the 1960s was struck down by the Constitutional Court in December 2006 as having no legal basis. The earlier conviction of a pilot for the murder of human rights defender Munir Said Thalib on board a flight to Amsterdam was overturned by the Supreme Court in Jakarta in October 2006. The case remains unsolved.

Indonesia is not an Islamic state. The state ideology, Pancasila, requires only that citizens believe in one supreme God, and that they accept membership of one of five officially sanctioned faiths, Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Orthodox Muslim groups have argued since independence that Islam should play a greater role in government and society, with some pushing for an Islamic state based on Sharia law. Secular nationalists have countered that this risks provoking secessionist moves in regions of Indonesia where Muslims are not a majority.

The political divide between the state and orthodox believers caused riots and a wave of bombings and arson attacks in the mid-1980s. However, Suharto successfully suppressed the more militant Islamic organizations, and co-opted the others. Under his authoritarian rule open reporting and discussion of religious and ethnic friction was banned.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

The position of some minorities, in particular the Chinese and the Acehnese, has begun to improve in recent years, but for most the high hopes that followed events after 1998 have not yet materialized. Since 2005 members of the Chinese minority no longer have a special code to highlight their ethnic background in identity papers, which might facilitate their targeting by officials, and some political parties in the 2004 elections openly claimed to be representing this minority, thus showing that this was no longer something to hide or to be ashamed of – a marked shift in overall attitudes after the anti-Chinese riots of less than a decade previously. The use of Chinese language and characters is no longer banned, as it was under Suharto.

The Acehnese have also gained a much higher degree of autonomy following the 2005 peace agreement. They are thus in a better position to insulate themselves from the more blatantly discriminatory practices of central authorities that tended to favour Javanese and migrant interests over their own. The first election for the province's governor in December 2006, won by Irwandi Yusuf, a former separatist rebel from the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), was largely peaceful, and may augur a period of peace and stability for Aceh, though it is still very early and unclear how the division of powers between the centre and Aceh will in practice be exercised in years to come.

With regard to other minorities, the position is far less optimistic. The lot of Papuans has not improved markedly since 2005. Compared to the Javanese and other ethnic groups, the Papuans continue to be hugely under-represented in most employment categories, and this remains particularly true in the provinces of Papua. Violence against Papuans has not ceased, nor have the activities of rebel groups such as the Free Papua Movement (OPM). Although the Indonesian government has declared Papua an autonomous province, Papuans have complained that this is a ploy to divide the independence movement. They have also complained that they are still being actively discriminated against by the state.

For Papuans and other indigenous minorities, mining, plantation and logging activities – as well as the main administrative branches of government – are still often perceived as being controlled by central authorities in Jakarta. Increased autonomy for many provinces in the last few years has not fundamentally changed this matrix. In many parts of Indonesia indigenous groups like the Dayaks and Papuans, whose culture is closely connected to traditional land and forest usages, often find their livelihoods threatened by large-scale logging and mining projects, such as the gold and copper mine run by the US corporation Freeport-McMoRan in Papua.

Despite a number of hopeful signs, like the 2003 conviction of four Kopassus members for the murder of Theys Eluay, leader of West Papua's Presidium Council, human rights and legal institutions have disappointed many local people as they seem unable to address the violations of the rights of minorities.

New citizenship legislation in 2006 has removed most of the obstacles to citizenship experienced by some members of the Chinese minority.

Since the downfall of Suharto there has been a revival of fundamentalist Islam in Indonesia. Because Islam is a powerful mobilizing force for politicians in Indonesia's new democracy, many firebrand Islamic preachers have been able to build up large mass followings with the tacit approval of the political elite.

In the May 2007 the US Commission on International Religious Freedom placed Indonesia on its 'watch list' for countries that require close monitoring 'due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated' by their governments. The Commission was concerned about the Indonesian government's inability or unwillingness to hold those responsible for sectarian violence to account, and the growing political power and influence of religious extremists who it identified as training, recruiting and operating in Central and South Sulawesi. It particularly highlighted the closure or damage of minority places of worship – at least nine Protestant churches, four Ahmadiyah mosques, and one Hindu temple have been closed or damaged in areas of West Java, North Sumatra, South Sulawesi and West Nusa Tenggara as a result of the influence of 'extremist' groups who incited mobs and/or intimidated local officials in the 2006/7 reporting period of the Commission.

17 Christians were jailed under Indonesian anti-terrorism laws in July 2007 for the murder of two Muslims. The two Muslim fishmongers were attacked in Poso, Sulawesi, in September 2006 by a mob angry at the execution in the same year of three Christians convicted of leading a group that killed hundreds of Muslims at a boarding school during inter-religious violence in Poso in 2000.

In its August 2007 report the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racism (CERD) expressed 'concern at the distinction made between Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, which are often referred to in legislation, and other religions and beliefs' and 'the adverse impact of such a distinction on the rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion of persons belonging to ethnic groups and indigenous peoples'. It noted with particular concern that 'under Law No. 23 of 2006 on Civic administration, individuals are to mention their faiths on legal documents such

as identity cards and birth certificates, and that those wishing either to leave the column blank or to register under one of the “non-recognized” religions, reportedly face discrimination and harassment’. The Committee also expressed concern ‘that men and women of different religions face great difficulties in officially registering their marriages, and that their children are not provided with birth certificates, as acknowledged by the State party.’

In June 2008, Islamist mobs attacked Ahmadiyah Muslims, whom they accused of heresy for their belief that Mohammad was not the last prophet. While the government decried the violence and detained some of the perpetrators, human rights organizations saw the roots of the violence in a government committee’s April 2008 recommendation that the sect be banned. Following the June attacks, the government issued a decree that did not ban Ahmadiyah, but did warn its adherents that they faced potential arrest under Indonesian laws on the protection of religion.

Global demand for alternative fuels is growing and the massive cultivation of biofuel crops such as oil palm, cassava and sugar cane in Indonesia is having a devastating effect on the lives of indigenous peoples. A coalition of environmental groups in Indonesia has called on the United Nations (UN) to intervene in an oil palm project being planned in Kalimantan. The project will allocate up to 1.8 million hectares (4.4 million acres) of land for oil palm plantations. The group fears the project will cause irreparable harm to indigenous people’s territories and cultures.

In August 2007 CERD noted ‘with deep concern reports according to which a high number of conflicts arise each year throughout Indonesia between local communities and palm oil companies’ and urged the Indonesian government to ‘secure the possession and ownership rights of local communities before proceeding further with this Plan’.

Tensions between the Outer Islands and Java mean that resource, environmental and labour issues continue to be affected by ethnic loyalties and divisions. Mineral and agricultural resources that generate Indonesia’s national income are largely found on the Outer Islands. Many minorities on the Outer Islands feel that they are given short shrift by the Javanese political elite, working with multinational corporations or Sino-Indonesian enterprises.

Tensions between Javanese and peoples of the Outer Islands have been exacerbated by the Transmigration programme, a policy implemented under Suharto to settle landless Javanese in the Outer Islands where land was viewed by the government as more plentiful. Though the programme has been dramatically curtailed since the fall of Suharto, it has not ceased completely: while only 12,500 families were targeted for transmigration in 2005, that number was almost doubled to more than 20,000 in 2006.

The Transmigration programme was officially instituted to relocate more than 1 million families to under-populated areas of the Outer Islands. Superimposed on the distinction between the dominant Javanese and all the Outer Island ethnic groups is the distinction between indigenous ethnic groups and ethnic Chinese, who, over a long period, have been subjected to sustained discrimination and ethnic violence, mainly for economic reasons.