



# INDONESIA

A COUNTRY PROFILE FROM INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS, INC.

## GEOGRAPHY

The Republic of Indonesia is comprised of more than 17,000 islands stretching for 3,000 miles from the mainland of Southeast Asia to Australia. With roughly 750,000 square miles, its land area is about the size of Alaska and California combined. Four-fifths of its territory is water.

The world's largest archipelago straddles more than one-tenth of the equator and forms a natural barrier between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Indonesia shares land borders with Malaysia and Papua New Guinea.

Most of Indonesia's larger islands contain coastal plains and mountainous interiors. Tropical rain forest covers three-quarters of the terrain. Only eight percent of the land is arable. Heat and humid-

ity prevail year-round, though the interior highlands remain cooler. November to April is monsoon season.

Indonesia is the world's most volcanic country, with more than 400 volcanoes. The eruption of Mount Krakatau off Java's west coast in 1883 spawned tidal waves that killed 35,000 people. The volcano Tambora erupted in 1815, killing 90,000.

Indonesia consists of five major islands. Sumatra, the world's fifth-largest island, is the westernmost. To the east of Kalimantan is Sulawesi. Irian Jaya, the western section of the island of New Guinea, forms Indonesia's eastern boundary.

## PEOPLE & LANGUAGE

With over 238 million people, Indonesia is the

world's fourth most populous nation, behind China, India, and the U.S. The island of Java, however, is one of the most densely populated areas in the world, with nearly 115 million people living in an area the size of New York State.

The annual population growth is 1.52 percent. Indonesia's people are young, with nearly 30 percent under 20. Life expectancy has risen to about 69 years.

Most people are of Malay extraction, but Indonesia has more than 300 distinct cultures, each with its own language or dialect. Seventeen languages have over one million speakers.

Bahasa Indonesia is the official language. Its spread as the national language since independence in 1945 helped to unify the nation, and it is now spoken by the

majority. Local languages are still important in many areas.

**Indonesia's national motto is "Unity in Diversity."**

English is the most widely spoken foreign language and is taught in schools as a third language, after Bahasa Indonesia and the particular ethnic language.

## MAJOR CITY CENTERS

Only one-quarter of the population is urban. The capital of Jakarta, on Java's northwest coast, is the largest city, with nine million people.

Also located on Java are Surabaya (2.9 million), Bandung (2.7 million), and Sumatra (2.7 million).

Most Indonesians live

in the archipelago's 60,000 farming communities.

## POLITICAL HISTORY

Hindu and Buddhist civilizations from India reached the area around the time of Christ, taking root especially in Java. The great kingdoms arising out of these two groups greatly influenced the region for hundreds of years.

Islam spread in the 1400s and became a dominant force in the next century. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were also marked by the arrival of Western traders. European sea powers fought for control of the valuable spice trade, with the Dutch eventually winning.

During their 350-year rule, the Dutch developed the Dutch East Indies, as the archipelago was then known, into one of the world's richest colonial possessions. Throughout that period, Indonesia fought to regain independence.

In the twentieth century nationalist organizations sought reform through political means. The independence movement expanded rapidly between the World Wars, and was actually encouraged by the Japanese during their

occupation of the region in World War II.

On August 17, 1945, three days after Japan surrendered, a small group of Indonesians, led by Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, proclaimed independence and established the Republic of Indonesia. After four years of warfare and negotiations, the Netherlands ceded sovereignty.

Most of the spice-rich islands Christopher Columbus was looking for when he discovered America are part of present-day Indonesia.

Indonesia embarked on a decentralization program in January 2001 that devolves substantial authority to the provincial and district levels. The ongoing decentralization program is meant to bring government closer to the people. It also has raised the question of efficiency and national cohesion.

A Communist coup attempt in 1965 radically altered the political orientation of the country. The army, led by General Soeharto, smashed the coup, and more than 300,000 Communists were executed. Soeharto became president shortly thereafter and banned the

Communist party.

Megawati Surkarnoputri was elected in 2003. And in September 2004, Indonesians elected retired general Susilo Bambang Yudoyono.

Bridging cultural differences is a priority of the government.

Indonesia's tens of thousands of political prisoners illustrate the social divisions within the country.

The country's official ideology, "Pancasila," or "Five Principles," is designed to unify Indonesia. The five tenets are the belief in one God, humanitarianism, national unity, democracy, and social justice.

Perhaps Indonesia's most notable government program has been its Transmigration Scheme. Over one million families, lured by government incentives, have voluntarily relocated since 1970. The intent is to take economic and environmental pressures off heavily populated areas by encouraging people to move to less densely populated regions.

Indonesia and the U.S. have maintained close relations since 1966. In fact, behind Japan, the U.S. is Indonesia's second-largest trading partner.

## ECONOMY

Agriculture and oil form the cornerstones of the economy. The majority of workers are employed in agriculture-related occupations. It was oil, however, that paved the way for dramatic economic improvements.

Indonesia, the seventeenth-largest oil producing nation, benefited tremendously from soaring oil prices in the 1970s. U.S. companies have invested heavily in the petroleum sector and with domestic demand for petroleum fuels expanding, Indonesia will become a net importer of oil by the next decade unless new reserves are found.

The country is rich in natural resources, though much of it remains undeveloped. Still, Indonesia is the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas and plywood. Indonesia has a large fishing industry also.

Other important agricultural products include rubber and palm exports, coffee, tea, sugar, soybeans, spices, and peanuts. Much of the land has richly fertile soils as a result of frequent volcanic eruptions.

The manufacturing sector, though small, is growing and now employs over 26 percent of workers.

Indonesia attracts nearly two million visitors a year. The mystical island of Bali is the most popular destination.

Indonesia has made great strides in its battle against poverty. In 1970, 60 percent of the people subsisted below the poverty level. Now, about 27 percent do.

Despite recent improvements in the standard of living, the average annual income is only about \$3,100 in U.S. currency. Under-employment is a major problem, especially among returning international students.

In the aftermath of the 1997-98 financial crisis, the government took custody of a significant portion of private sector assets through acquisition of nonperforming bank loans and corporate assets through the debt restructuring process.

On May 20, 2002, East Timor became an independent state, as the U.N. administration handed over power to president-elect José Alexandre Gusmão.

## EDUCATION

The government has emphasized education as critical for social and economic development,

especially as a means of providing skilled labor. The results have been encouraging.

In 1970, for instance, school enrollment was less than 50 percent. Today, about 92 percent are enrolled in primary school (schooling is compulsory for children through age nine), and nearly half of those go on to junior high.

Another example is the literacy rate, which has risen from 10 percent before independence to the present 88.5 percent.

Each of Indonesia's 27 provinces has at least one state university.

More than 10,000 Indonesians were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in the 2002/03 school year, many of whom are Chinese Indonesians.

## CULTURE

Variety is the hallmark of Indonesian culture. Each island and people group has its own culture, customs, and traditions. Primitive tribes still exist in some areas (especially Irian Jaya) while urban dwellers in other parts of Indonesia enjoy all the modern conveniences.

Indonesians are generally a quiet, unas-

suming, considerate people.

Loyalty and cooperation among members of Indonesia's traditionally large families are cherished traits. In rural areas, extended families often live with or near one another.

Typically conscious of other's feelings, Indonesians rarely disagree in public. Laughter is used to mask anger, shock, or embarrassment. Embarrassing someone is a terrible insult.

The group in Indonesia is preeminent over the individual. Indonesians typically demonstrate physical and emotional closeness to others of the same sex. They also place great importance on politeness and correct form, and little importance on time.

Marriages are often still arranged in rural areas, but seldom in cities. Indonesians typically wed at a young age. Indonesian women generally have more rights than women in other Muslim cultures.

Indonesians enjoy all types of sports. The country is consistently among the world's best in badminton. Volleyball and tennis are also popular, particularly with the youth. Cockfighting (though outlawed), ox races,

bullfights, bicycling, martial arts, kite flying, and watching television are also favorites.

Dance and drama are integral parts of Indonesian culture. Most dances tell a story of magic and mystery; some are performed in a trance state and involve the worship of a deity.

## HOLIDAYS

Indonesia observes a variety of religious, ethnic, and regional holidays and festivals.

Independence Day on August 17, marked with dances, speeches, and parades, is a major national holiday. Other holidays include International New Year's (January 1), Id-ul-Fitr (celebrating the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting), Id-ul-Adha (celebrating the end of the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca), and the Muslim New Year. A Mother's Day celebration especially honors Ibu Kartini, a champion of women's rights.

The Christian holidays of Christmas, Good Friday, and Ascension are also national holidays. Hindus celebrate many of the Hindu festivals. Chinese celebrate the Chinese New Year.

## RELIGION

Indonesia has the world's largest concentration of Muslims—87 percent of the population. Although not an Islamic state, Muslims hold considerable political clout, frequently resulting in preferential treatment for Muslims.

Islam is strongest in Sumatra, Java, and many coastal areas in the east. Many Muslims, however, are nominal in their beliefs and combine their Islamic practices with those of other faiths.

Through the constitution, citizens may choose to follow Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Christianity. To avoid religious conflict, however, proselytizing and criticism of other religions is prohibited.

Hinduism and Buddhism predate Islam in Indonesia, and once held much greater influence in the region. Hindus make up two percent of the population. They are concentrated primarily in Bali.

Buddhism and Chinese religions constitute little more than one percent, mainly among the Chinese. Animism is found on some of the less inhabited islands. Many Indonesians practice ancestor worship.

## CHRISTIANITY

Christianity has experienced tremendous growth in Indonesia in the last few decades. Christians now account for about eight percent of the population.

The Gospel has spread rapidly in certain areas, while other regions remain virtually untouched. In Irian Jaya and a number of smaller islands, for instance, Christians constitute the majority. In other areas, such as Bali, Christians make up less than one percent of the population. The over 30 million Sundanese in West Java represent the largest unreached people group in the world.

Christians enjoy a disproportionate influence in Indonesia because many are well-educated and live in urban areas, and therefore have a significant impact on the economy, industry, civil service, and military. Numerous Christian universities and schools, providing high-quality education, add to that influence.

Muslims have frequently wielded their influence to limit Christian expansion. Some Muslim extremists have reacted with violence against Christians in areas where the Gospel has taken hold.

Since 1978, the government has made efforts to reduce the missionary presence in Indonesia. Much evangelism, therefore, is being carried out by "tentmaker" missionaries and strong national churches.

Roman Catholicism was introduced to the area as early as the seventh century. Significant missionary activity did not begin until the 1500s with the arrival of the Portuguese. They were followed by the Dutch, who led a revival in the late nineteenth century.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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