



# U.S. FORCES INDOPACIFIC **CULTURE GUIDE**

**Indonesia**



# About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information contained within will help you understand the cultural dimension of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 “Culture General” introduces the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment – Southeast Asia in particular.

Part 2 “Culture Specific” describes the unique cultural features of Indonesian society. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location.



For further information, visit the Air Force Culture and Language Center (AFCLC) website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) or contact the AFCLC Region Team at [AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil](mailto:AFCLC.Region@us.af.mil).

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# PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

## What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing. For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a

cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



## Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

### **Cultural Domains**

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize these behaviors and systems into categories – what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains” – in order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains – which include kinship, language and communication, and social and political systems among others (see Worldview) – as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways different cultures define family or kinship, a deployed military member can more effectively interact with members of that culture.



### **Social Behaviors Across Cultures**

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even group those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques.

Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption. Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of

unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.



### Worldview

One of our basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different according to our cultural standard. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Consequently, we assume that individuals falling into the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

## 12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview – how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for our actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

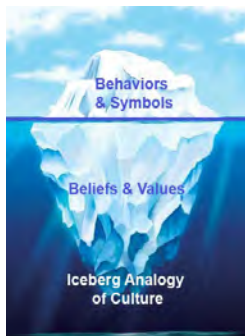
### **Cultural Belief System**

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true – regardless of whether there is physical evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central facet of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have help shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

### **Core Beliefs**

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted. Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the



submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout Southeast Asia, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

## CULTURAL DOMAINS

### 1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.

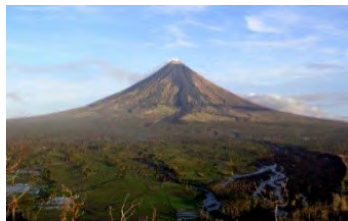


Southeast Asia includes 5 countries on the mainland (Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam) and 5 maritime countries in the North Pacific

Ocean and the South China Sea (Malaysia, Singapore,

Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei). As early as 150 BC, the scattered communities on the mainland traded with and paid tribute to the dominating kingdoms of China and India. China maintained a presence in Vietnam for over 1000 years, while's India's influence was felt mainly as its inhabitants spread Hinduism, Buddhism, and later Islam across the region. Southeast Asia's most famous ancient empire, the Khmer, ruled for 4 centuries beginning around 800 AD from its center at Angkor in Cambodia. Later, Thai kings expanded across the mainland, while a Hindu kingdom from India united the Indonesian archipelago.

China began to halt its expeditions to the region in mid-15th century, just as European nations began sending theirs. The



Portuguese were the first to conquer a Southeast Asian settlement in 1511, although their influence in the region was short-lived. Observing their success, the Dutch and English moved into the area as well. The Europeans sought to

acquire trade routes and territories, and from the 17th through the 19th centuries the Dutch worked to consolidate their power in today's Indonesia, the Spanish their control of the Philippines, the English their hold over Burma and Malaysia, and the French their control over Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. By the beginning of the 20th century, virtually all of Southeast Asia was controlled by colonial powers; only Thailand remained independent.

During World War II, Japan invaded and occupied portions of Malaysia, Burma, Thailand, and the Philippines. After the war, independence movements regained traction, and following years of struggle against the occupying Americans, the Philippines became the first country in Southeast Asia to gain its independence in 1946. Other countries endured years of instability and conflict on their way to independence. In Vietnam, communist rebels battled and defeated the French but then engaged the US in a controversial war. A civil war in Cambodia



ended in the rise to power of the Khmer Rouge, during whose reign in the late 1970s almost 2 million people died. A few years after the Dutch ceded power in Indonesia, a dictator took control in a coup and ruled for 32 years before resigning in 1998. Similarly, a military junta wielding absolute power has ruled Burma since 1962. Since the 1990s, Southeast Asia has largely enjoyed renewed stability. Both Thailand and Malaysia now have an affluent, educated middle class; Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam are well on the road to recovery from decades of conflict; and even Burma has recently held elections and initiated reform to a civilian democracy.

## 2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.



Differences in the physical environment affected the social and political structures that historically developed in Southeast Asia. Where people were nomadic or semi-nomadic, systems of

government were less permanent and bureaucratic. In areas where populations were more settled, a reliable tax base allowed the development of more elaborate and permanent governing structures. These early states, though, often found it difficult to extend their authority into the remote highlands, where small tribal groups resided, and the islands, where some groups lived permanently in water communities of small boats.

Significant changes occurred in Southeast Asia around 2000 years ago as peoples from China and India began to move into the region (see *History and Myth*). New leaders formed new empires and states, and spiritual beliefs and practices changed as religious leaders introduced new religious traditions (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Many colonial-era governments, fearing the threat that an educated class might hold, largely denied education and civil liberties to most Southeast Asians and discouraged political

activities. Political participation swelled around the time of independence, although many post-independence political structures in the region were dictatorial and repressive. While most countries are healing from their 20th century conflicts, many governments continue to reflect authoritarian elements. Elites across the region continue to seek to control access to the political system. They are typically from the country's dominant class, which is often comprised of members of a particular ethnic group.

Some countries, such as Vietnam and Cambodia, are somewhat ethnically homogenous, while others, such as the Philippines and Indonesia, are much more diverse. Many countries also have minority communities of ethnic Chinese and Indians. So-called hill tribes, minority groups with distinct ethnic and linguistic identities, are found in Burma, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), formed in 1967, is a regional intergovernmental organization whose goal is to promote economic and political cooperation among its members, including the creation of a free trade community. ASEAN priorities include fostering economic and diplomatic relations with India and China, which have been strained due to longtime territorial disputes in the region. The European Union has a strong relationship with the organization and has taken steps to deepen trade and business links. The US also has close political, security, and economic relations with most of the member states.

The relationship between Japan and the countries of Southeast Asia has improved significantly since World War II, and Japan is a crucial economic and aid partner today.



### 3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help

preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

The earliest populations of Southeast Asia were animists, which means they believed that many different spirits inhabited elements in the natural environment, such as trees and rocks, or were represented in natural phenomena, such as thunder and lightning, or represented deceased ancestors. In many areas today, these traditional beliefs are still very important, and many Southeast Asians incorporate them in their practice of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity.

Indian traders and priests first brought Hinduism to Southeast Asia in the 1st century AD, where it eventually became the dominant religion in several kingdoms. In the 14th century the influence of Hinduism began to wane as people turned to Islam. Today, although there remain only small communities of Hindus in Indonesia, the Hindu principles of absolutism and hierarchy remain significant in politics across the region.

Indian merchants also brought Buddhism to Southeast Asia beginning in the 1st century AD where it became well established in Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Later, Chinese immigrants introduced Buddhism to Vietnam and Singapore. Many Southeast Asian mainlanders

are Buddhist today, although their beliefs and practices may also include some animist and Hindu traditions.



Chinese people spread the teachings of Confucius primarily in what is today Vietnam and Singapore. These teachings embody a

complex belief system emphasizing stability, consensus, hierarchy, and authority that still influences ideas of social harmony across the region.

Islam reached Southeast Asia beginning in the 10th century through Muslim traders from the Middle East, China, and India, with a large number of Southeast Asians converting to Islam

beginning in the 14th century to escape the Hindu caste system. The largest population of Muslims in the world, approximately 240 million, lives in Indonesia today. Muslim minority communities in Thailand and the Philippines have historically suffered economic and political marginalization.

Christianity was introduced to the region by European colonizers beginning in the 16th century. Today, although parts of Indonesia have Christian communities, the Philippines is the only predominantly Christian country in Southeast Asia.

#### 4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).



Family life is very important to Southeast Asians and relationships among family members are highly valued. As in the US, kinship is generally traced through both parents. Children are

generally very respectful of their parents, and parents are devoted to their children, making economic or other sacrifices as a matter of course to ensure their well-being.

Traditionally, close proximity of kin was a valuable resource in Southeast Asia's agriculturally-based villages. Families were large and close-knit as individual members supported each other economically and socially and the rhythms of family and village life mirrored those of the agricultural cycle.

Family life in Southeast Asia has changed in recent decades as societies have become more economically and socially diverse due to industrialization and urbanization. Today, a much wider variety of occupations is open to both men and women, and the middle class is growing in cities across the region. Women have fewer children today than they did 3 decades ago, and many households in the cities no longer contain 3 or 4 generations of extended family but are mostly nuclear families.

Many Southeast Asian countries that have large rural hinterlands, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand, also have large metropolises, such as Jakarta, Manila, and Bangkok. In these sorts of countries, there is a sharp rural-urban divide in economic and educational opportunities that results in stark differences in rural and urban family life. In rural villages, extended families may remain intact whose activities revolve around agricultural production, while in urban centers the household is usually much smaller and family structures are much more diverse.

Although arranged marriages are much less common today, most Southeast Asians depend on their family's input when choosing a marriage partner. The ages of both the bride and groom have increased as young people postpone marriage to pursue economic and educational opportunities, and divorce rates have risen in recent decades. Of note, in Indonesia and Malaysia Muslim men are allowed to practice polygyny, or have more than one wife, if they can afford to support them all. For these Southeast Asians, matrimony and divorce are under the jurisdiction of Islamic law.

## 5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

Southeast Asia's dominant philosophies and religions (Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity) privilege the male's role as provider and stress female subordination. Despite most countries' commitment to gender equality, women across Southeast Asia may find participation in the business and political spheres difficult, and in some countries there is still a marked preference for sons over daughters.



Despite these challenges, there is widespread acceptance of women in the workplace, though women usually receive less pay than men. Industrialization has provided new opportunities for

women, and many Southeast Asian women continue to work beyond marriage and children. Hundreds of thousands of Southeast Asian women even relocate to other countries to work as nurses and domestic workers.

Within the agricultural sector, women produce about 50% of food in the region and represent a significant share of the agricultural labor force. They are particularly involved in harvesting rice, tea production, and working on rubber and fruit plantations. Women generally have access to education and training, and in Thailand and the Philippines there are actually more post-secondary female graduates than males.

Opinion on sexual orientation and gender identity is most liberal in the Philippines, where homosexuality is legal and there have been attempts to pass anti-discrimination legislation to protect sexual minorities. But in many parts of Southeast Asia homosexuals suffer discrimination and stigmatization. Malaysia criminalizes homosexuality and cross-dressing, and in Indonesia these individuals are often the victims of violence and exploitation.

## 6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is



defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

Southeast Asia is linguistically very diverse; of the approximately 6000 languages spoken in the world today, about 1000 of them are found in Southeast Asia. Many of the ancient indigenous languages that were present in the region have become extinct as a result of war, cultural and economic domination, and small population size.

The languages of mainland Southeast Asia belong to 3 groups: Austro-Asiatic (such as Cambodian and Vietnamese), Tai (such as Thai and Lao), and Tibeto-Burmese (including highland

languages and Burmese). Languages that belong to these 3 groups are also found in India and China. Conversely, most of the languages spoken on the islands of Southeast Asia belong to the Austronesian family, a group of languages originating from southern China and Taiwan.

The colonial powers that controlled Southeast Asia until the 20th century primarily promoted and used their own languages including French, Dutch, English, and Spanish. Since independence, several states have named one local linguistic variety as the “standard,” such as Bahasa Indonesian and Bangkok Thai, and promoted its use over both European and other local languages. Recently, after years of aggressively promoting their national languages, many Southeast Asian countries have re-introduced English as a language of instruction in school and allowed ethnic Chinese and Indians to attend school in their own languages.



Ancient Southeast Asians developed their own writing systems based on scripts from India and China. Today, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Indonesian, and Filipino, like English and most western European languages, use the Latin alphabet, while Burmese, Laotian, Thai, and Cambodian use writing systems derived from ancient Indian scripts.

Southeast Asians are rarely confrontational or highly demonstrative and emotional in their communication. They value respect as a key component in maintaining social harmony, and conveying respect is a significant aspect of both verbal and non-verbal communication. For example, proper greetings, such as pressing the palms together and slightly bowing as is common in Thailand, are extremely important across Southeast Asia.

## 7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health

requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Throughout their history, the cultures of Southeast Asia have willingly borrowed and adapted ideas, practices, and institutions from beyond the region. This willingness is evident in the history of education. Prior to colonization, both Hindu and Muslim traders and migrants from India and beyond brought their own



traditions of education to the region, and local Southeast Asian communities adopted these curricula and educational methods to their needs.

Later, during the colonial period, the European powers were largely uninterested in providing education to

Southeast Asians because they viewed them principally as agricultural laborers. If the colonial powers did provide educational opportunities, they were largely confined to members of privileged groups.

Still later, as populations across the region began to resist colonization, the lack of educational opportunities became a topic around which to rally. In many countries, local activists adopted western educational methods but also drew on local traditions to devise new educational opportunities through which they articulated their arguments for independence.

Today, education in Southeast Asia is viewed as both a tool for developing the region and as a human right. Consequently, in most countries education is open to every citizen regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic background. Rapidly growing populations challenge most national governments in their goals of providing 12 years of basic education to all, often forcing a sacrifice in the quality of services. Students in both urban and rural areas often suffer from a lack of adequate



classrooms, teachers, and good text books, although primary school enrollment averages an excellent 96% in the region.

## 8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, in most Southeast Asian cultures establishing and maintaining relationships within the group can take precedence over accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner.

Southeast Asians' emphasis on the well-being of the group and maintaining social harmony often means people will deliberately avoid embarrassment of themselves and others, a strategy often referred to as "saving face." Many Southeast Asians try to manage their time efficiently while still showing respect to their co-workers and maintaining "face."



Time is maximized by multi-tasking, and engagements usually start when scheduled. Networking is very important in Southeast Asia, and new contacts are often best made through a high status third party who knows both parties well. Only after the establishment of a good rapport can business negotiations proceed.

Public and private spaces often overlap in a way that is unfamiliar to Americans. Shop owners may also live at their place of business, so entering into a public space can also mean entry into an individual's private space. Consequently, customers and clients should always show proper respect.

## 9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of Southeast Asia's forms of creative expression, such as art, architecture, dance, music, and theater, reflect the

diversity of cultures and ethnicities of the region as well as the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Ancient and elaborate Hindu temples and highly symbolic statues of Buddha are found in many countries. Similarly, across Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines, Islamic art and architecture

intermingle with examples of Hindu and local animist traditions.



Traditional classical dance and theater are enjoying a revival after some forms

came close to extinction during the wars and conflicts of the 20th century. These traditions trace back to the ancient kingdoms of the region and often include dancers dressed in elaborate masks and costumes. Ancient forms of shadow-puppet theater, in which paper puppets are manipulated against a lighted backdrop, are also popular in several countries.

Combat sports of Asian and Western origins are popular in Southeast Asia today. With the end of the colonial-era ban on martial arts, indigenous forms such as *Pentjak Silat* and *Bersilat* combined with other Asian forms to make up *Muay Thai*, *Pencak Silat* and *Kali*, the main components of today's Mixed Martial Art fighting.

The Southeast Asian Games are an important regional sporting event. These biennial games bring together over 4,000 athletes for 11 days of competition in the Olympic sports and promote regional cooperation and understanding.

## 10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

As expected from Southeast Asia's location on the water, more fish is consumed than any other form of animal protein. Rice, a grain that has been cultivated in the region for thousands of

years, is the primary food staple. Everyday meals are typically simple, consisting of chopped pieces of meat and vegetables that are fried or steamed and served with rice, often accompanied by spicy chili condiments. Influences from India and China are obvious in popular dishes such as spicy curries and rice noodle soups. Members of Muslim communities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines typically do not eat pork or drink alcohol.

Malaria, HIV/AIDS, and the lack of clean drinking water are the main health concerns in Southeast Asia. With an estimated 10% of worldwide new cases coming from the region in 2022, malaria is a major problem. The HIV/AIDS epidemic was delayed in reaching Southeast Asia but turned into a major cause of death throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, due to successful HIV prevention programs including those aimed at sex workers and their clients, transmission rates have steadily declined, and recent HIV/AIDS incidence rates have been similar to those of the US. Access to clean water has increased in most regions but in Burma, Cambodia and Laos 11-15% of the population still lacks access to improved drinking water sources.

All countries are faced with the rise of non-communicable diseases among their aging populations, and most face the threat of emerging infectious diseases, such as the avian flu.



The countries of Southeast Asia confront many challenges in providing health care for their growing populations. Rapid but unequal socioeconomic development has resulted in significant disparities in health and access to healthcare. Despite these challenges, most countries have experienced a continual increase in life expectancy since the 1950s.

## 11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services.

Most Southeast Asian communities practiced wet-rice and slash-and-burn agriculture for centuries before the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century. In addition, Southeast Asia's geographical location between China and India as well as its position on navigable waterways which connect the West and Middle East with Asia and Australia made the area an important center of trade well before European presence.

With European expansion into the area came the introduction of plantations and the mechanization of agriculture as well as the entry of the region into the global marketplace. Worldwide demand for rice increased dramatically in the 19th century, further changing the agricultural landscape of the region. Today, all 3 agriculture types – wet-rice, slash-and-burn, and plantation – are still practiced in the region and all have caused serious ecological damage such as massive deforestation and an increase in the production of greenhouse gases.

Beginning in the 20th century the region experienced a dramatic industrialization process with growth rates exceeding even those of developed nations.

Explosive growth in exports such as textiles, electronics, auto parts, and petroleum lead to double-digit

economic growth, greatly increasing local GDPs. Though in 2022 roughly 10% of the population currently lives below

the poverty line of \$2.15 per day, regional economies have grown and now supply both skilled and semi-skilled workers to other countries.



The 2008 global financial crisis caused damage to the economies of Southeast Asia. While the financial sector did not engage in high-risk lending practices, there was a severe drop in exports due to a global reduction in spending from which the countries are still recovering.

## 12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. After the colonial period, the countries of Southeast Asia have expanded at different rates and currently experience varied levels of economic development. Their places in the global market range from Singapore, which has the second-highest GDP per capita world-wide, to Burma and Cambodia which are ranked among the poorest countries in the world.

Prior to colonial rule, the region's inhabitants were expert farmers, having adopted domesticated rice from India and China and developed complex rice-farming techniques, or mariners who traded across the region. European colonists brought additional skills in metalworking, agriculture, sailing, and navigation. The introduction of commercial agriculture, mining, and an export-based economy during the colonial period placed Southeast Asia on its current technological path.

Southeast Asian nations are generally open to trade and investment, having transformed from inward-looking economies dominated by agriculture to outward-looking, market-oriented economies in just a few years. As China's "backyard," Southeast Asia is often seen as the site of economic competition between China and the US and between India and Japan. Despite lingering mistrust of China because of several unresolved maritime territorial disputes, some Southeast Asian nations welcome China's investment in infrastructure, energy, agriculture, and mining. About 20% of Southeast Asia's total trade is conducted with China. By comparison, about 7% of Southeast Asia's trade is conducted with the US.



Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize Southeast Asian society at large, we will focus on specific features of Indonesian society.

# PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

## 1. HISTORY AND MYTH

**Note:** Modern Indonesia occupies most of the Malay Archipelago, the world's largest island chain with over 17,000 islands. Stretching some 3,200 mi east-to-west, Indonesia straddles the equator in the Indian and Pacific oceans. This vast territory consists of 7 regions: Sumatra; Java; Kalimantan (on the island of Borneo); Sulawesi (formerly known as Celebes); the Maluku Islands (also known as the Moluccas); Papua (previously known as West New Guinea and Irian Jaya); and the Lesser Sunda Islands (including Bali, Timor, and Nusa Tenggara). The narrow Strait of Malacca separates Sumatra from Peninsular Malaysia. Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, is located on the northwestern coast of Java. Of note, Java, Bali, and Madura (known as the "inner" islands) historically have been more populous and politically important than the other "outer" islands, which hold fewer people but have a greater wealth of natural resources.

### Overview

Indonesia's position on the major maritime trade routes between the Middle East, India, and China greatly influenced its historical trajectory.

From ancient times, sailors, traders, explorers, and pilgrims from diverse cultures and religious traditions traveled through the region, with both indigenous and foreign powers struggling for control of strategic ports and seaways, rich agricultural regions, and the trade of exotic spices. Since its official establishment in 1949, Indonesia has endured authoritarian leaders, regional insurrections, and ethnic and religious tensions to become an economically developing and politically stable nation devoted to "unity in diversity," its motto.



## Prehistory of Indonesia

Fossil finds (nicknamed “Java Man”) indicate that a human species called *Homo erectus* lived on Java as early as 1.7 million years ago. Archaeological evidence suggests that regional inhabitants grouped in small communities and made tools for hunting, fishing, and foraging activities as early as 800,000 years ago. In 2003, scientists exploring the island of Flores discovered a fossil skeleton with several unique traits, such as a notably small stature and brain size, leading them to assign the fossils

to a new species—*Homo floresiensis*.

Nicknamed “hobbits” for their small size, these early residents likely lived between 100,000-60,000 years ago, used stone tools, and hunted a variety of animals.



Around 50,000 years ago, the first modern humans arrived from other parts of Asia. These residents buried their dead and manufactured stone axes. Ochre-painted handprints and animal figures in the Maros-Pangkep caves in Sulawesi's Bulusaraung

Mountains are around 36,000 years old. By about 20,000 years ago, regional residents likely began to engage in agriculture. About 10,000 years later, long-distance seafaring, pottery-making, and metal-working skills spread throughout the region. Beginning around 4500 BC, a new group of humans entered the region from the area of present-day Taiwan by way of the Philippines. By 2500 BC, inhabitants were raising domesticated animals and utilizing advanced agricultural techniques such as wet-rice cultivation.

## Early History in the Archipelago

The early history of the archipelago is characterized by a variety of regional lifestyles. For example, communities of farmers flourished in inland Java, where rich volcanic soils and abundant water facilitated rice cultivation. Meanwhile, coastal island communities turned outward, developing trade relationships with other islands and inland villages. By contrast, residents in the

drier regions of Borneo and Sulawesi tended to live in small, relatively isolated communities where they practiced “slash-and-burn” agriculture – the clearing of fields with fire, cultivating them for a few years, and then abandoning them (see *Economics and Resources*). These early patterns contributed to the development of substantial cultural and linguistic diversity across the archipelago that remains intact today (see *Language and Communication*).

Soon, regional residents were venturing beyond the archipelago. In the 1st century AD, Roman historian Pliny the Elder noted that Indonesian outriggers had reached Africa’s east coast. A few decades later, Greek geographer Ptolemy collected information regarding Java and Sumatra assembled by Indian merchants, which suggested that contact between South Asia and the archipelago was not uncommon.

By about the 5th century, the archipelago was used to transport maritime trade between China and India. Of note, 5th- and 6th-century Chinese literature records the existence of Indonesian products such as Sumatran tree resins. Local residents were employed as exporters, shipbuilders, navigators, and port authorities for the delivery of goods between these great powers. Small kingdoms on Sumatra initially used their access to the Strait of Malacca, the main shipping route between the Indian Ocean and South China Sea, to control much of the archipelago’s maritime trade.

This thriving trade brought new materials and technologies, such as Vietnamese kettle drums, from mainland Asia. It also brought new concepts of government and kingship, art, and religion – mostly Hinduism and Buddhism (see *Religion and Spirituality*) – resulting in the development of complex kingdoms and empires across Sumatra and Java.





## Kingdom of Srivijaya on Sumatra

In the 6th century, the Buddhist empire of Srivijaya expanded from the city of Palembang on Sumatra to eventually control the Straits of Malacca and Sunda, most of the islands of Sumatra and Java, parts of Borneo, and much of Peninsular Malaysia. The kingdom absorbed smaller ones as it grew wealthy between the 7th-11th centuries through trade in spices, silk, jewels, incense, and tropical woods with India, China, the Middle East, and various other kingdoms in the archipelago. Nevertheless, Srivijaya's power began to wane as vassal ports refused to pay tribute. Beginning in the late 12th century, competing empires and pirates targeted Srivijaya's riches and control of trade. Following a 1377 defeat by the Majapahit Empire (see below), Srivijaya finally fell around 1400.

## Javanese Kingdoms

Unlike the leaders of Srivijaya, ambitious rulers on Java sought to control territory for wet-rice cultivation but also traded as far as Cambodia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Over the centuries, several great states rose and fell on Java, leaving impressive temples and monuments as testaments to their wealth and power.

In 732, the ruler of the Hindu Sanjaya dynasty established the Kingdom of Mataram, which flourished until the 10th century. In the late 700s, the Buddhist Sailendra dynasty took control of Mataram, and over subsequent decades, constructed the



Borobudur compound, the world's largest Buddhist temple. Located in the Kedu Valley in central Java, Borobudur combines Indonesian indigenous traditions of ancestor worship with Buddhist concepts of nirvana (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Later, the

Hindu Sanjaya dynasty regained control of Mataram and constructed Prambanan, a massive Hindu temple complex near the city of Yogyakarta dedicated to the Hindu gods Vishnu (the

preserver), Shiva (the destroyer) and Brahma (the creator) (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Following a volcanic eruption around 1000 and several wars with the Srivijaya Empire, the Javanese seat of power moved some 400 mi to the east. Various kingdoms rose and fell as Javanese influence expanded to Sumatra and Borneo. Most kingdoms were neither fully Hindu nor Buddhist. Instead, they reflected a hybrid Hindu-Buddhist belief system in which the kingdom's ruler was revered as godlike.

In the late 13th century, Javanese King Kertanagara sought to extend his divine power and authority to southern Sumatra. In response, Mongol leader Kublai Khan sent an envoy from his base in China in 1289, requesting that Kertanagara submit to his rule and pay tribute. Kertanagara refused, even maiming a member of the Mongol delegation.

In response, Kublai Khan prepared an invasion fleet of around 20,000 soldiers. By the time the Mongols arrived in 1292, Kertanagara had lost his throne in a local power struggle. Following several battles with the Javanese, the demoralized Mongols withdrew. While this expedition was the last of Kublai Khan's reign, it marked the beginning of Indonesia's most powerful empire, Majapahit.

### **The Majapahit Empire**

After quelling numerous rebellions, Majapahit's rulers had firmly established their authority on Java by 1319. In subsequent decades, Majapahit extended its influence to Bali, Sumatra, and Borneo.

Indonesians typically consider the reign of Majapahit ruler Hayam Wuruk (r. 1350-89) the most glorious period in Javanese history. A eulogy written in 1365 called *Nagarakertagama* (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) venerates Hayam Wuruk while providing detailed descriptions of his



capital's palaces, temples, and Hindu-Buddhist religious ceremonies. Today, *Nagarakertagama* is recognized as a masterpiece of Old Javanese literature.

At its height, Majapahit was the trading and cultural center of the archipelago. Besides profiting from rice production, the empire controlled sea routes throughout the archipelago, trading with or receiving tribute from most major islands. Nevertheless, the empire began to weaken in the 15th century. In 1527, the Javanese Muslim state of Demak conquered Majapahit (see "The Spread of Islam"). Thereafter, the Hindu-Buddhist Majapahit nobility largely retreated to neighboring Bali, where residents still retain these religious traditions today (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

### The Elephant General

Although never a king, Gajah Mada (translated as the "Elephant General") is remembered widely as the original Indonesian unifier who tried to unite the islands under Majapahit. Born a commoner, Gajah Mada eventually acquired status, serving as Prime Minister from 1331-64. Upon taking office, he famously vowed to give up spice until successfully bringing the entire archipelago under Majapahit control. Perhaps due to this ***Sumpah Palapa*** (Spice Pledge), Majapahit's influence stretched from Sumatra to Papua by the end of his tenure. Today, some Indonesians revere Gajah Mada as a national hero, although others resent him because, to them, he symbolizes Javanese dominance in the archipelago.

### Other "Outer" Islands

Meanwhile, the kingdoms of Java and Sumatra dominated the smaller kingdoms on other "outer" islands throughout the archipelago. Largely due to their isolation and small populations, some inland groups on these "outer" islands remained unaffected by Hindu, Buddhist, and later Islamic influence, instead maintaining their own indigenous belief systems (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

These groups included ancestors of the Dayak communities inhabiting the interior of Borneo, some occupants of southernmost Nusa Tenggara, and hundreds of ethnolinguistic groups within West New Guinea (Papua) (see *Political and Social Relations*). During the 15th century, news spread throughout Asia, the Middle East, and Europe that the “outer” Maluku Islands were the only source (at that time) for rare spices such as cloves and nutmeg, thus sparking colonial interests. As a result, these islands were sometimes referred to as the “Spice Islands”.



### The Spread of Islam

Although Arab Muslim merchants likely began visiting Indonesia as early as the 7th century, the influence of Islam grew

substantially some 500 years later when Muslim traders began to expand their networks throughout the Strait of Malacca. Two small harbor kingdoms that formed in northern Sumatra in the mid-13th century were likely Indonesia's first Muslim sultanates (kingdoms).

As Srivijaya's influence began to decline on Sumatra, other actors, both foreign and domestic, jockeyed to fill the void. By the end of the 14th century, the Muslim sultanate of Samudra-Pasai on Sumatra flourished as a wealthy commercial center. Nevertheless, the focus of regional trade soon shifted. In the early 15th century, a Hindu-Buddhist prince exiled from Srivijaya established the Kingdom of Malacca (“Melaka” in Malaysia today) on Peninsular Malaysia's southwest coast, just across from Sumatra. Due to its good harbor and strategic location, the Kingdom soon controlled the Strait of Malacca, a route used primarily for transporting spices, gold, tin, silks, porcelain, and tea. In the early 15th century, Malacca's sultan (king) converted to Islam and declared his sultanate a Muslim state. Malacca soon became a hub for the spread of Islam throughout the region.

As Islam spread to Java, new harbor kingdoms emerged on the island's northern coast. These sultanates thrived on trade relationships with the larger Muslim world, especially the export of rice to Malacca. Thus, commerce played a key role in the spread of Islam. Other rulers of kingdoms, such as those on Sulawesi, either converted for political reasons or after conquest by a Muslim state. Some peasants embraced Islam for its less restrictive practices. Nevertheless, Hindu-Buddhist influence persisted, particularly the strict royal court and class system, in which the **priyayi** (aristocracy) ruled over rural peasants. Of the 3 "inner" islands, Islam did not spread to Bali.

### Local Kingdoms Rise and Fall as Europeans Arrive

The 16th and 17th centuries were eventful. Islam spread as kingdoms and sultanates rose and fell. As Indonesians, Chinese, and Arabs continued to compete for control of trade, Europeans appeared, seeking wealth and access to the region's rare spices.

From its capital in present-day Banda Aceh, the Sumatran sultanate of Aceh became the region's dominant power in the 16th century. Despite its significant military might, which included support from the powerful Ottoman Empire based in modern-day Turkey, the sultanate failed to acquire territory beyond Sumatra. Nevertheless, it grew wealthy through the export of pepper, nutmeg, cloves, betel nuts, and later, tin.

Meanwhile, Malacca's reputation for lucrative trade spread to Europe. Spurred by potential profits and the chance to spread Christianity, the Portuguese reached Malacca in 1509, conquering it in 1511. Local resistance effectively prevented the Portuguese from developing their desired trade monopoly, although they did establish trading bases on several Indonesian islands and introduced Roman Catholicism to the region (see



*Religion and Spirituality*). For the remainder of the 16th century, the Portuguese, Aceh, and a sultanate in Peninsular Malaysia vied to control regional trade. As Malacca's wealth and influence declined, Aceh became the region's leading center of Islamic scholarship.

### **The Dutch Establish the United East India Company**

Soon, the British, Spanish, and Dutch arrived, also seeking to exploit Indonesia's resources and control trade. While Spain eventually withdrew north to colonize the Philippines, the British initially remained. In 1596, the Dutch reached the sultanate of Banten, western Java's dominant power, after a 14-month voyage. Over the next several years, Dutch ships competed with each other, local traders, and other Europeans, attacking

settlements in search of spices in the archipelago (known to Europeans as the East Indies).

To exclude other European competitors and control the activities of indigenous traders, the Dutch



formed the United East India Company (*Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or VOC) in 1602. Under the control of the Dutch government, the VOC had the authority to negotiate treaties and wage war.

In 1611, the VOC relocated its center of operations from hostile Banten to the city of Jayakarta. In 1619, a local sultan seeking to expand his own holdings allied with British forces to besiege Jayakarta. After VOC reinforcements arrived to break the siege, the Dutch demolished Jayakarta with fire, building a settlement named Batavia (present-day Jakarta) in its place.

From their headquarters in Batavia, the Dutch gradually established trading posts throughout the archipelago, often as a consequence bloody battles and the deaths of thousands of Indonesians. At first, the VOC was a single power among many. By the end of the 17th century, the Dutch controlled the production of trading goods and acquired authority over trade

routes. In 1641, the VOC ousted the Portuguese from Malacca and then confined the British to one small territory on Sumatra. Although the VOC preferred profits over territory, the VOC was soon drawn into local political disputes.

### **The Dutch and the Mataram Sultanate**

At the turn of the 17th century, the Mataram sultanate (named for the ancient Hindu-Buddhist kingdom) became Java's dominant force. In subsequent decades, its rulers acquired control of much of Java, Madura, and Borneo but were unable to dislodge the Dutch, who had gained control of the seas. Over the course of several decades, the Dutch intervened in the sultanate's internal affairs, supporting factions in wars of succession and quelling rebellions. Each time, the Dutch gained territory as



payment for their efforts, gradually acquiring control of most of Java. Of note, the Dutch similarly tried to intervene in local affairs on Sumatra, although large-scale Dutch expansion on that island did not occur until the 19th century. By 1670, Batavia's population had swelled to 130,000.

### **Events on the Other Islands**

Several sultanates competed for domination of Sulawesi beginning in the 16th century, including the Bugis, Temate, and Makassar sultanates. While the Dutch acquired direct control of the Makassar region in 1669, much of the rest of Sulawesi remained under indigenous rule until the Dutch campaigns of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the early 16th century, the sultanates of Tidore and Ternate in the Maluku Islands established alliances with the Spanish and Portuguese, respectively. These Europeans were ousted by 1575. The Dutch arrived by the beginning of the 17th century, gaining control of Ternate in 1683.

Many of the eastern Lesser Sunda Islands recognized the authority of Sulawesi's Makassar sultanate until its conquest by the Dutch. While both the Portuguese and Dutch competed for



control of the region, neither considered control a priority due to its limited commercial potential. By the mid-19th century, the Dutch claimed the Lesser Sunda Islands, except for Portuguese-controlled East Timor. The Dutch established indirect rule, whereby various indigenous kingdoms retained political control as they agreed to help the Dutch monopolize on the spice trade.

In the "inner" island of Bali, the Hindu Gelgel court ruled until 1651, claiming descent from Majapahit. After Gelgel rule collapsed, several minor royal families competed for control of Bali until the mid-19th century.

Several Muslim sultanates established themselves along Borneo's coasts, driving tribal peoples further into the island's interior. The most prominent of these sultanates was Banjarmasin, founded in the early 16th century in South Borneo. Although the VOC signed treaties with several of these states, many remained centers of resistance against European domination well into the 19th century.

By contrast, outside interest in the island of New Guinea was minimal during this period. Most communities were isolated from one another by thick forests, and no major indigenous states emerged. Various kingdoms from other islands engaged in limited trade with New Guinea, harvesting its natural resources or enslaving its people. The Europeans, for the most part, left an even lighter footprint, building just a few small settlements.

### VOC Operations

In areas it directly controlled, the VOC adapted indigenous structures of power and authority for administrative purposes. For example, it used some Indonesian *priyayi* and Chinese migrants to collect taxes and products for export, only gradually turning this system into a formalized bureaucracy. Besides



building trading posts, the VOC used violent methods including destroying human and plant populations in order to exert total control over certain spices like nutmeg and cloves. They also compelled residents to grow and sell crops at prices set by the Dutch. In the 18th century, the VOC faced a variety of challenges. For example, smugglers threatened the company's monopoly, administrative costs grew as the VOC was forced to bear more governing responsibilities, and corruption among VOC officials reduced company profits. Consequently, the VOC accrued enormous debt. A global collapse in spice prices caused a regional economic slump that only worsened the VOC's economic health.

### The French and British Interlude

When France conquered the Netherlands in 1795, it gained control of Dutch territories in Indonesia. The Dutch government subsequently terminated the VOC in 1799, resulting in French rule of the Dutch East Indies for the next decade. As part of the hostilities between France and Britain during the European Napoleonic Wars, a British East India Company force led by the governor-general of India invaded Java in 1811 and quickly defeated the French. The British then ruled the archipelago for the next 5 years.

Led by Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles (who later founded Singapore), the British administration adopted some liberal reforms designed to end societal ills such as corruption and forced labor. In addition, the British began to treat the *priyayi* as employees in a bureaucracy rather than autonomous indigenous royalty and were



therefore unable to gain much local support. Consequently, the British failed to implement comprehensive reforms to land tenure patterns, setting the foundation for new Dutch colonialism. At the conclusion of the war in Europe, Britain returned control of the region to the Dutch in 1816, which reorganized its holdings in the archipelago as the colony of the Dutch East Indies. Of note,

Raffles rediscovered the buried ruins of Borobudur, and his fascination with Javanese culture led him to publish a history of the island in 1817.

### **The Dutch East Indies in the 19th Century**

As noted earlier, the Dutch colonial presence in Indonesia prior to the 19th century was less concerned about establishing a local bureaucratic system of government than securing profits from the spice trade. By contrast, the new Dutch goal of making the colony self-sufficient brought major societal changes such as alterations of trading patterns and native political structures.

Specifically, Dutch colonial society comprised 3 ranks: “in-landers” (natives); “foreign orientals” (mainly Chinese, but also Arabs and Indians); and Europeans. Two bureaucracies propped up the colony, one composed of European or creole (a person of mixed Indonesian and European descent) civil servants and another of Indonesian (typically *priyayi*) officeholders. To make the colony profitable, the Dutch converted many traditional rice plantations into cash crop farms.

**The Java War and Other Disturbances:** These major social changes, combined with ongoing disease outbreaks and widespread starvation, caused violence to erupt. Between 1821-37, the Dutch joined an ongoing conflict known as the Padri War between Islamist reformers and traditional nobility in western

Sumatra. Meanwhile on Java, Prince Diponegoro led an uprising against the Dutch in 1825 known as the Java War. Relying on guerrilla tactics, the rebels challenged Dutch authority for 5 years, resulting in the deaths of some 8,000 Dutch and more than 200,000

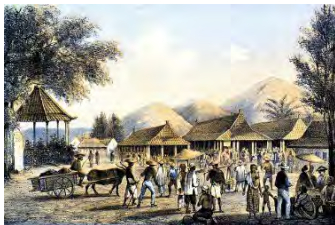


Javanese, mostly as a result of disease and starvation. Sulawesi, Borneo, and Maluku also experienced violence during this period.

**The Culture or Cultivation System:** In 1830, the Dutch devised a new system to control and profit from the archipelago's

resources. The so-called Culture or Cultivation System compelled Javanese villages to set aside some 20% of their land for the production of export crops, which they then passed to the government as land rent. Compulsive cultivation focused first on indigo and sugar and was later broadened to include coffee, tea, tobacco, and pepper. The system yielded significant profits as exports soared. Nevertheless, the system amplified social and economic inequalities in rural areas. While *priyayi* working in the Dutch administration typically benefitted from the system, peasants largely became victims of malnutrition and forced labor. Meanwhile, Chinese immigrants were restricted to tax collection, moneylending, and small trading. Finally, the system provided no avenue for technological development or economic improvement for the Javanese people.

**The Liberal Policy:** In the 1860s, observers generally condemned the Culture System for its humanitarian abuses, while also criticizing the lack of opportunity for



private investment in the colony. In response, the Dutch introduced the “Agrarian Act” of 1870, which allowed European investors to acquire Indonesian land under long-term lease. Under this policy, private investment shifted production to raw materials such as rubber, tin, and oil required by the European Industrial Revolution. Instead of Indonesians cultivating their own land, the system allowed the development of a company-owned plantation economy. Notably, most plantation development occurred on Sumatra. Meanwhile, the population also boomed on Java between 1800-1920 – the island’s population grew from 6 million to over 40 million.

### **Dutch Territorial Expansion**

This 19th-century economic development was accompanied by Dutch territorial expansion. While the Dutch already controlled most of Java by the mid-18th century, over the 19th century, they gradually expanded their holdings on Sumatra and sought to extend and complete their hold over the entire archipelago. To this end, the colonial regime developed a professionally trained

Army. Although Army leadership was predominantly European, most troops were in-landers. Expansion also brought more Dutch to the archipelago, whose presence underscored colonial social and ethnic divisions.

Some expansion was relatively bloodless. The British relinquished their small territory on Sumatra to the Dutch in 1824. That same year, the 2 colonial powers agreed that the western 1/2 of the island of New Guinea (Papua today) would become part of the Dutch East Indies.

Other acquisitions involved conflict and loss of life. In the name of ***Rust en Orde*** (Peace and Order), the Dutch sought to conquer the kingdoms and sultanates of Sumatra, Sulawesi, Borneo, and the Lesser Sunda Islands and officially incorporate them into the colony. These conquests were marked by massive resistance and lingered for decades. For example, a Dutch campaign to defeat pirates operating in northern Sumatra ultimately became a declaration of war against Aceh in 1873. A long period of guerrilla warfare ended in 1908, when the Dutch finally asserted control over the island's northern tip.

In 1906, a procession of Balinese aristocrats confronted Royal Dutch East Indies forces by refusing to halt when commanded. Instead, they proceeded to walk toward the Dutch troops, who responded by opening fire and killing about one thousand Balinese at point blank range. Avoiding surrender and choosing death in this way was called *puputan* (mass suicide). The Dutch then burned and ransacked the Balinese palace. After similar violent confrontations throughout the archipelago, the Dutch finally controlled the territory that comprises present-day Indonesia by 1920.



### The Ethical Policy

The 30 years of the Liberal Policy did little to improve the living conditions for most Indonesians. Criticism grew around the idea that the Dutch had drained the East Indies of its resources without fair compensation and thus owed a "debt of honor" to its inhabitants. Consequently, the

Dutch developed the Ethical Policy in 1901 to improve education and healthcare, while providing agricultural extension services at the village level.

In reality, the effects were modest and confirmed the divide between the European large-scale commercial economy and Indonesian traditional subsistence wet-rice or slash-and-burn cultivation. While it failed to produce the desired class of civil servants loyal to the Netherlands, the Ethical Policy provided educational opportunities that helped to foster the emergence of an elite group of aristocrats who would become the leaders of Indonesia's nationalist movement.

### The Emergence of Indonesian Nationalism

Beginning in 1908, an organized challenge to colonialism began to appear for the first time. The new class of educated elite founded a series of educational organizations, trade guilds, political parties, and religious organizations. Although differing in goals and tactics, these organizations were all broadly nationalistic. Boycotts, strikes, protests, and open revolts flared in the 1910s-1920s, although mostly suppressed by the Dutch.



In 1927, an engineer named Sukarno (or Soekarno in the Dutch spelling) founded one such organization, the **Partai Nasional Indonesia** (PNI – Indonesian Nationalist Party). A year later, several student organizations made the **Sumpah Pemuda** (Youth Pledge), vowing “One Homeland, One People, One Language” (see *Language and Communication*). With the slogan **merdeka** (freedom), the independence movement was born.

Momentum soon stalled, however, when the Dutch arrested and imprisoned Sukarno and other nationalist leaders. While the Dutch allowed some moderate parties to function, they tightly controlled most political expression. The WWII Japanese occupation actually hastened the emergence of an independent Indonesian nation-state by empowering indigenous leaders to throw off Dutch colonial rule as part of Japan's anti-Western wartime rhetoric.

## Occupation during World War II (WWII)

A primary objective of Japan's early WWII campaign was to seize Southeast Asian resources – namely Indonesia's oil, rubber, and strategic naval locations – to support its expansionist goals. A Japanese fleet entered Indonesian waters in early 1942, where it encountered Dutch, Australian, and US warships. After several battles, the US and its allies were forced to withdraw. The Dutch surrendered the archipelago, beginning a 3 1/2-year Japanese occupation.

Initially, Indonesians generally welcomed the incoming Japanese troops as a departure from Dutch colonial rule. Indeed, the Japanese quickly rounded up Dutch administrators, eventually interning some 100,000 European civilians in concentration camps and 80,000 Dutch, British, Australian, and

US troops in prisoner-of-war camps. Further, they banned all traces of Dutch influence in the occupied colony, including changing the name of the capital city from Batavia to Jakarta in tribute to the city the Dutch had destroyed in the 17th century.



With most Dutch administrators interned, the Japanese needed Indonesians to take their places. As the *priyayi* and new urban middle class filled civil servant positions, both Indonesian nationalists and the Japanese occupiers came to believe that cooperation would further both of their interests.

Consequently, the Japanese released political prisoners and created several new nationalist organizations. As head of the Japanese-sponsored organization **Putera** (Center of People's Power), Sukarno became a well-known figure. In 1943, the Japanese also oversaw the creation of a volunteer Indonesian defense force, or **Peta**, that would become the core military force of the Indonesian revolution.

Despite these gains, numerous Indonesians suffered under Japanese occupation. Japan confiscated Indonesian rice to enhance its war efforts, causing widespread famine. It also enforced a strict curfew, while eliminating dissent through the activities of a secret police force. Some Indonesians suffered arbitrary arrest, torture, and execution. While Sukarno's collaboration furthered the nationalist cause and positioned him for post-war leadership, his responsibilities also included sustaining a forced-labor (***romusha***) program. As a result, millions of Indonesians were relocated within the archipelago or elsewhere in Southeast Asia to work on Japanese military projects. Many died due to harsh treatment or starvation.

Faced with the likelihood of defeat in WWII, Japan announced its intentions to prepare the archipelago for self-government in late 1944. Shortly before surrendering in August 1945, Japan promised an immediate transfer of power to Sukarno and his colleague Mohammad Hatta. Before the transfer could occur, Japan surrendered on August 15. Two days later, Sukarno and Hatta declared Indonesia's independence.

### ***The Pancasila***

In a June 1945 speech, future President Sukarno introduced fundamental principles that he believed should form the basis of an independent Indonesia. These principles included the belief in one God, humanitarianism, nationalism, democracy, and social justice. Known as the *Pancasila*, these 5 principles became Indonesia's national ideology under the subsequent President Suharto.

### **The War for Independence**

Despite the declaration, independence took 4 years to achieve. Allied forces, mostly British Indian troops, arrived in September 1945 to supervise the withdrawal of the Japanese and the release of foreign internees. Meanwhile, the Dutch considered Sukarno's government illegitimate and pursued reinstatement of colonial rule. The British soon faced significant anti-Dutch sentiment that ultimately led to war.

In November 1945, the revolution's bloodiest battle occurred in Surabaya in eastern Java. Over the course of 3 weeks, heavy fighting between British and Indonesian troops resulted in the deaths of some 600 Europeans and up to 15,000 Indonesians. Dutch troops soon arrived in the archipelago, and the battle became a symbol of Indonesian resistance as the city of Yogyakarta became the revolutionary capital.

Within a year, the British withdrew from Indonesia. Following a failed treaty, the Dutch initiated a violent "police action" that compelled the United Nations (UN) to intervene and broker



another treaty. Enraged by the terms of the deal, communist separatists rebelled against the Sukarno government. The Dutch responded with a second "police action," crushing the revolt and capturing Sukarno and Hatta.

### **Independence Achieved**

Despite their success, the Dutch now faced significant international outrage and ongoing guerilla attacks. In January 1949, the UN demanded that the Dutch recognize the Sukarno government. After negotiations, the Dutch finally recognized the sovereignty of the United States of Indonesia on December 27, 1949. Within a year, this federal structure had been replaced by a unitary government, the Republic of Indonesia, with Jakarta as its capital and Sukarno its President. Of note, the Dutch retained the territory of West New Guinea.

### **The Early Years of the New Republic**

The new country faced numerous challenges, particularly societal divisions along religious, political, and ethnic lines; widespread poverty; an economy in ruin; and low education levels. Further, the government faced ongoing defiance to its authority, including an Islamist insurgency in Java and rebellions in Sumatra and Sulawesi.



Under a 1950 provisional Constitution, Sukarno held little real power, particularly since there were some 170 political parties competing for influence. As a result of the 1955 elections, political power was distributed primarily among the secular nationalists of Sukarno's PNI, 2 Muslim parties, and the ***Partai Komunis Indonesia*** (PKI – Indonesian Communist Party). As conflict between the export-producing outer islands and Java intensified, military intervention increased.

### Sukarno's Guided Democracy

Tiring of his figurehead role, Sukarno appealed to the patriotic fervor of his supporters. He then announced that Western-style democracy was unsuited to Indonesia, introducing instead a system of "guided democracy" theoretically based on principles of deliberation and compromise.

Over the next 6 years, Sukarno sought to unify the country by promoting a sense of national identity, all the while increasing his authoritarianism and promoting an anti-Western and anti-Chinese stance. During his years in power, some 150,000 Dutch and Chinese fled or were evicted from the country. Sukarno's government also nationalized Dutch assets, restricted free expression and the right of assembly, censored Western media, arrested dissidents, and limited the activities of several political organizations. As other parties withered, the PKI thrived on a membership in the millions. The Army grew alarmed as Sukarno



protected the PKI from suppression, banned anti-PKI movements, and elevated PKI leaders to positions of power.

In 1962, Sukarno sent an invasion force to West New Guinea to seize control of the region from the Dutch. Although unsuccessful, the move

compelled the UN to step in and require the Dutch to cede control of the region pending a referendum. Between 1963-6, Sukarno staged an undeclared act of war or ***konfrontasi*** (confrontation) against Malaysia in opposition to the merger of

Malaya, Singapore, and British colonies of Borneo into a unified nation of Malaysia. Sukarno's confrontation with various powers over the formation of Malaysia came to be supported by leaders in communist Moscow, who agreed with Sukarno's attempt to overturn the Western colonial status-quo in favor of newly emerging powers.

### Sukarno's Fall and the Rise of Suharto

In the early morning of October 1, 1965, several young Army officers assassinated 6 of Indonesia's senior generals and proclaimed a revolutionary council, subsequently known by the governing regime as GESTAPU, an acronym for **Gerakan September Tiga Puluh** (the September 30th Movement). General Suharto (also spelled Soeharto), commander of the elite Army Strategic Reserve, assumed command of the Army and suppressed the coup. Of note, General Suharto had also led the 1962 invasion of West New Guinea and the ongoing *konfrontasi* against Malaysia. President Sukarno denied any connection to the coup leaders, as did the PKI. Nevertheless, the military believed the PKI was behind the attempt to seize power and unleashed a spree of bloody reprisals.

To purge the country of the perceived PKI communist threat, the military spread anti-communist propaganda. Soon, Army special forces, nationalist militias, and civilian mobs were engaging in the organized killing of communists and communist suspects. By the time the bloodshed ended in 1966, at least 500,000 people had been killed and another 1.5 million were imprisoned or sent to labor camps.

In this chaos, the military forced Sukarno to delegate extensive powers to General Suharto, who then banned the PKI and dismantled many of Sukarno's policies. In 1967, Sukarno was forced to resign, remaining under house arrest until his death in 1970. In spring 1968, Suharto became President, an office he would hold for the next 30 years.



## Suharto's New Order

Suharto promised stability through economic development under a program called the "New Order." He ended Sukarno's anti-Western policies, encouraged foreign investment, and welcomed US aid. Successful reforms and global demand for



Indonesia's oil generated much-needed revenue, allowing investment in infrastructure, education, and healthcare.

Despite these improvements, Suharto's authoritarian tendencies compelled him to eliminate opposition

parties and imprison political opponents. Political activity was closely monitored. The government-sponsored Party of the Functional Groups (***Partai Golongan Karya***, or ***Golkar***) won every general election between 1971-98, returning Suharto to the Presidency each time. Although Suharto's hold on power was secure, his regime's authority was not uncontested.

**Indonesia Formally Acquires West New Guinea:** In 1969, a referendum in West New Guinea confirmed its residents' desire to join Indonesia as the province of Irian Jaya (West Papua and Papua today), although critics charged the vote took place under coercion. In 1971, the Free Papua Organization (OPM) formed and has since conducted guerrilla resistance in the region (see *Political and Social Relations*). Among other grievances, OPM members resent the Indonesian government's exploitation of the region's natural resources.

**Indonesia Invades East Timor:** Settled by the Portuguese in the 16th century, East Timor (1/2 of the island of Timor) remained in Portuguese hands until 1974, when revolution forced Portugal to withdraw from its colony. In 1975, civil war broke out. Fearing a potential communist state as its neighbor, Indonesia invaded. In mid-1976, Indonesia declared East Timor an Indonesian province.

The Indonesian government made some investments in East Timor's schools, healthcare system, and infrastructure. Still,

many residents resented incorporation into Indonesia. Armed resistance continued for over 20 years, which the Indonesian military answered with harsh tactics and human rights abuses. During the 1970s-80s, experts estimate some 200,000 East Timorese died from conflict, starvation, or disease.

**Unrest in Aceh:** Granted a “special status” including the right to enact Islamic laws in 1959, Aceh’s tradition of resistance flared again in the 1970s following the discovery of large oil reserves. In 1976, the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) formed, and by 1977, began to conduct guerilla attacks, including one against US oil industry workers. GAM continued its activities intermittently for almost 30 years, often prompting response of Indonesian military offensives (see *Political and Social Relations*).

**Discontent Grows:** In addition to these regionally-based movements, opposition to Suharto arose elsewhere. Some devout Muslims rejected the secular nature of the *Pancasila* ideology enshrined in the 1945 Constitution, which Suharto emphasized to combat Islam and promote plurality in Indonesian society. Other critics focused on the regime’s rampant corruption, restrictions on free press and speech, dependence on Western capital, or environmental devastation. Following riots in 1978, the government closed some media outlets and arrested student leaders.

By the late 1980s, Suharto’s government was thoroughly corrupt and mismanaged. Through privileges and unfair advantages, Suharto’s family and



business partners controlled entire economic sectors, particularly the petroleum industry, banking, broadcasting, and advertising (see *Economics and Resources*). Suharto increasingly relied on violence to ensure his hold on power, removing perceived threats through assassination and using the **Kopassus** (special forces) to commit violence against student

activists. Throughout the 1990s, demonstrations against his regime continued.

### *Transmigrasi*

Indonesia's *transmigrasi* (transmigration program) has a long history. First instituted by the Dutch in the early 20th century, the program aimed to reduce poverty and overcrowding on Indonesia's more densely-populated islands, such as Java, Bali, and Madura, by moving residents of those islands to other regions having fewer people, such as Papua, Kalimantan, Sulawesi, and Sumatra. During their rule, the Dutch moved some 650,000 Javanese to Sumatra to work on plantations. Following independence, both Sukarno and Suharto continued the program. At its peak between 1984-89, around 2.5 million people were resettled.

Ultimately, the program failed to improve migrants' lives. In fact, the arrival of new populations often caused tensions. Violence occasionally flared, resulting in deaths and causing many migrants to flee. Beginning in 2000, the government significantly reduced the scale of the program before abolishing it completely in 2015.

### **Suharto's Fall**

A major financial crisis in mid-1997 caused the sudden devaluation of Thailand's currency. The crisis soon spread across Asia, hitting Indonesia particularly hard, causing mass unemployment and food shortages (see *Economics and Resources*). Amidst widespread accusations of electoral fraud, Indonesians reelected Suharto in March 1998.

In May, demonstrations swelled again. When security forces shot demonstrating students in Jakarta, angry crowds filled the streets, looting and setting fires, often targeting Chinese-owned businesses (see *Political and Social Relations* and *Economics and Resources*). Riots continued for several days, resulting in

the deaths of more than 1,000 people. On May 21, Suharto resigned from office, and his Vice President B.J. Habibie was sworn in as the new President.

### **Reformasi**

The end of the New Order triggered significant reform, or **reformasi**. Immediately upon taking office, Habibie freed political prisoners, lifted restrictions on the media, and curbed the military's power. New laws allowed the creation of political parties, and civil servants were allowed to be members of a party other than Golkar.



In August 1999, Habibie supported a UN-sponsored popular referendum in Indonesia-occupied East Timor (also known as

Timor-Leste). When some 80% of voters chose independence, Indonesian troops and local militias burned homes and businesses, forcing thousands to flee and prompting the involvement of UN peacekeeping troops. After East Timor achieved its independence in 2002, over 200,000 refugees returned.

In 1999, Indonesia held its first free election since 1955, which yielded a stalemate among parties. In the end, moderate Muslim leader Abdurrahman Wahid (known as Gus Dur) assumed the Presidency. Wahid continued some reform efforts, removing discriminatory laws against the Chinese, changing Irian Jaya's name to Papua, and promoting the removal of the ban on communism. These and other unpopular actions failed to unite the country and left him without allies. After Wahid was implicated in multiple financial scandals, a special session of parliament removed him from power in 2001. Megawati Sukarnoputri, former President



Sukarno's daughter, replaced Wahid as President. Sukarnoputri oversaw economic growth, the transfer of power to local authorities, and a major constitutional overhaul. Among other measures, the new Constitution established human rights protections and called for the direct election of the President and Vice President.



### Contemporary Indonesia

In 2004, Indonesia held its first direct presidential election. Campaigning on an anti-corruption and pro-education platform, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (known as SBY) defeated Sukarnoputri. SBY soon faced a major crisis when an earthquake off the coast of Sumatra triggered a tsunami that inundated the island's west coast, particularly the province of Aceh (see *Political and Social Relations*). Subsequently, Aceh separatists and the government entered into a peace agreement that granted Aceh additional autonomy (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Voters acknowledged SBY's economic and political actions and policies by reelecting him in 2009.



While Indonesia under SBY was generally prosperous and stable, his second term was marked by corruption scandals. In 2014, Joko Widodo (known as Jokowi) became Indonesia's seventh President. Notably, Jokowi is the first President elected without direct family or professional ties to the political and military elite. Since taking office, Jokowi has enjoyed popular support but also faces significant opposition (see *Political and Social Relations*). Of note, in 2017, an Islamist hardliner defeated Jakarta's first Christian governor after accusing him of blasphemy against Islam (see *Religion and Spirituality*), thus underscoring the increasing power of Islamic conservatives in the country.

## Myth

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity.

Indonesia's myths are representative of its great cultural and linguistic diversity. Each ethnic group typically has its own myths and legends that explain their origins and history. Many Indonesian myths reflect animist, Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic traditions and themes (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Several Indonesian stories explain how new religious traditions



spread through the archipelago. For example, according to myth, Hinduism spread through the activities of revered Hindu sage Agastya. The author of several sacred Hindu texts, this mythic figure supposedly traveled to the archipelago, converting many local rulers.

Similarly, other stories tell of the **Wali Sanga**, revered saints who spread Islam through the archipelago. Active on Java during the 15th century, the saints were scholars who also performed

miraculous feats, such as constructing a mosque in a single night.

Finally, the **Ratu Adil** (Just King) is a messianic figure in Indonesian folklore. First mentioned in a set of prophecies by a 12th-century Javanese king, the *Ratu Adil* will rise from humble beginnings to bring universal peace and justice. Throughout Indonesian history, various figures have claimed either to be the *Ratu Adil* or to be following his instructions, including the 14th-century Majapahit Empire's Gajah Mada, 19th-century Java War leader Diponegoro, and President Sukarno.



## 2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

### Official Name

Republic of Indonesia

***Republik Indonesia***

### Political Borders

Malaysia: 1,169 mi

Papua New Guinea:  
512 mi

Timor Leste: 157 mi

Coastline: 33,999 mi



### Capital

While currently Jakarta, in January 2022, Indonesian lawmakers approved the relocation of the country's capital to Nusantara. The move is expected to take several years.

### Demographics

Indonesia has a population of over 281.5 million, making it the world's fourth-most populous country after China, India, and the US. Indonesia's population growth has slowed in recent decades, from 2.4% in 1980 to 0.73% in 2024, primarily due to decreased fertility rates (see *Sex and Gender*). Indonesia has concurrently undergone steady urbanization – the urban proportion of the population has grown from 22% in 1980 to 59% in 2023. The cities of Jakarta, Bekasi, Surabaya, Bandung, Medan, and Tangerang are the most populous urban areas.

While just the fifth-largest island, Java is the most densely populated, housing over 70% of the country's population.

### Flag

The Indonesian flag, officially known as ***Sang Saka Merah***

***Putih*** (The Sacred Red and White), consists of 2 equal horizontal bands of red and white and derives from the banner



of Java's 13th-century Majapahit Empire (see *History and Myth*). The top red stripe represents courage and blood, while the bottom white stripe symbolizes purity and the human spirit.

## Geography

Located in Southeast Asia, Indonesia occupies the world's largest volcanic archipelago. With an estimated 13,000-17,000 islands, roughly 6,700 of them inhabited, Indonesia extends for about 3,200 mi along the equator between the Indian Ocean in the West and the Pacific Ocean in the East. The Asian continent lies to the North and the Australian continent to the South. Combined, the islands' total land area is 699,451 sq mi, making Indonesia about 1/5 the size of the US and slightly larger than Sudan.

Indonesia shares islands with 3 other countries.

The Indonesian province of Kalimantan shares the island of Borneo with



Malaysia, while Papua borders Papua New Guinea on the island of New Guinea. Finally, West Timor shares the island of Timor with independent Timor-Leste (East Timor). Sumatra's northern coast borders the Strait of Malacca, which at just 1.7 mi wide at its narrowest point, provides the shortest route between the Pacific and Indian oceans. Indonesia's strategic location on this and other important waterways shaped its history and development as a nation (see *History and Myth*).

The towering Central Mountain range runs west-east along the archipelago, containing more than 400 volcanoes. Notably, Indonesia lies along the Ring of Fire, a volcanic- and earthquake-prone zone that circles the edges of Pacific Ocean and accounts for 75% of the world's volcanoes. At 16,024 ft, Indonesia's highest mountain is Mount Puncak Jaya, located on New Guinea. On most islands, rugged mountainous interiors sharply descend into lowlands and subtropical rainforests, which cover nearly 2/3 of Indonesia's territory. Coral reefs and mangrove swamps run along the coasts. Borneo is home to the

nation's 2 longest rivers, the Kapuas and the Barito, which, like other Indonesian rivers, serve as important transportation links to inland rural areas.

## Climate

Indonesia has a tropical climate that is generally hot and humid year-round. Although conditions vary by altitude, temperatures range between 72°F-84°F, with relative humidity of about 80% across the country. While highlands tend to be cooler, temperatures may rise to 97°F along the northern coasts during dry seasons. Dry air from the Australian desert in the South drives the dry season from June to September. Indonesia receives heavy annual rainfall between November-March due to monsoons originating in the Indian Ocean. Rainfall tends to be heaviest along Sumatra's western coast and in the mountains.



## Natural Hazards

Indonesia is vulnerable to several types of natural hazards, including earthquakes, tsunamis, cyclones (tropical storms characterized by strong,

spiraling winds), flooding, and landslides. In 2004, Indonesia suffered a devastating earthquake, causing a tsunami that killed over 200,000 people and left over 1/2 million displaced, primarily in Aceh. Earthquakes in 2005, 2006, 2009, and 2016 killed and left homeless tens of thousands.

Intensified by deforestation (see “Environmental Issues” below), frequent floods resulting from heavy monsoon rains regularly damage infrastructure and cumulatively cause the most deaths of all natural hazards. Landslides are also a threat in mountainous regions. Notably, Indonesia has the world's highest number of deaths from volcanic eruptions, with the latest eruption occurring in March 2023.

## Environmental Issues

Decades of industrial expansion, commercial logging, agricultural activities, and residential development have resulted in extensive deforestation. Starting in the 1970s, the government

encouraged urban dwellers to relocate to rural areas, significantly increasing the clearing of land through the 1990s. Notably, from 1990-2005, Indonesia lost 30% of its forest cover, resulting in habitat loss and threatening Indonesia's biodiversity.

Although the government has since established several national parks and wildlife sanctuaries to preserve the country's forests, rural poverty compels many Indonesians to illegally cut and log timber or burn forests to clear land for farming. In fact, the widespread use of fire to clear land renders Indonesia one of the world's top carbon emitters and results in serious pollution. Known as "the haze," this air pollution creates significant health concerns and hampers relations with neighboring countries. Meanwhile, agricultural and industrial runoff pollutes Indonesian coasts and rivers with pesticides, chemical fertilizers, and heavy metals. Finally, large urban areas are subject to air pollution caused by motor vehicle, industrial, and waste-burning emissions.



## **Government**

Indonesia is a presidential democratic republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 35 provinces, 2 special districts in central Java (the Special Capital Region of Jakarta and the Special Region of Yogyakarta), and the autonomous province of Aceh, each administered by elected officials and local governments. Developed in 1945, repealed following independence, and reinstated in 1959, Indonesia's Constitution has been amended several times, most recently in 2002. The Constitution outlines Indonesia's system of government and the fundamental rights of its citizens.

## **Executive Branch**

The highest level of executive authority is vested in the President, who is the head-of-government, head-of-state, and commander-in-chief of the Indonesian Armed Forces. A Vice President (VP) and a 34-seat Cabinet, whose members are appointed by the President, support the President in overseeing

the nation's day-to-day affairs and implementing domestic and foreign policy. Both the President and Vice President are directly elected by absolute majority popular vote to serve up to 2 consecutive 5-year terms. Of note, the President has historically been a member of the political party that holds the majority of seats in the Parliament or had a prominent military background. Current President Prabowo Subianto Djojohadikusumo, and VP Gibran Rakabuming Rakatook office in 2024.

### Legislative Branch

Indonesia's legislature is a 2-chamber People's Consultative Assembly (***Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat*** or MPR) composed of the 580-seat House of Representatives (***Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat*** or DPR) and the 136-seat Regional Representative Council (***Dewan Perwakilan Daerah*** or DPD). DPR members are directly elected in multi-seat constituencies to serve 5-year terms, while DPD members are directly elected in multi-seat constituencies by proportional representation, also to serve 5-year terms.



As the more powerful chamber, the DPR retains all federal legislative control, including the power to amend the Constitution, impeach the President, approve declarations of war, and appoint positions in government. By contrast, the DPD deals with regional issues and does not have the authority to initiate federal legislation.

### Judicial Branch

Indonesia adheres to a primarily secular, civil law system that is influenced by traditional, customary law (***adat***). Consequently, the system varies somewhat by region and among Indonesia's many ethnic groups (see "Ethnic Groups" below). The judiciary's highest court, the Supreme Court (***Mahkamah Agung***), consists of 51 judges divided into 8 chambers. Judges are nominated by

a Judicial Commission, approved by the Parliament, and appointed by the President to serve until retirement at age 65.

The Constitutional Court (***Mahkamah Konstitusi***) consists of 9 members who serve until retirement at age 70, nominated in groups of 3 by the President, Supreme Court, and Parliament. Other courts include High Courts of Appeal, a system of district courts, and religious courts adhering to ***sharia*** (Islamic) law that arbitrate family matters for Muslim communities. Notably, secular district courts must approve decisions made by corresponding *sharia* courts, except in the province of Aceh, which subscribes entirely to *sharia* law. Finally, military courts preside over matters pertaining to armed forces personnel.

### Political Climate

Indonesia's historically turbulent political climate (see *History and Myth*) is characterized by a multi-party system in which parties or coalitions of parties compete for power. Of note, political parties subscribe at least in part to Indonesia's official national ideology of ***Pancasila*** ("5 principles"): nationalism, democracy, humanism, social justice, and belief in one God.

Parties often base their political platforms on a combination of these principles, which are intended to promote peace and harmony within Indonesia. Despite



this unifying philosophy, political infighting is common. Parties and coalitions dissolve and reform often, resulting in frequent shifts in power.

As of 2019, Indonesia's DPR primarily consists of members from moderate, secular groups and conservative, Islamist parties. The DPR's 3 nationalist secular parties include the Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDI-P), the Democratic Party (PD), and the Functional Group Party (Golkar). Meanwhile, DPR's 4 Islamist parties include the United Development Party (PPP), National Awakening Party (PKB), National Mandate Party (PAN), and Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Other parties with

DPR seats are the People's Conscience Party (Hanura), Great Indonesia Movement Party (Gerindra), and NasDem.

A former governor of the capital city of Jakarta, former President Widodo was the nation's first President not associated with the military or a powerful political family. Although he entered office with little experience in foreign policy, national security, and broad economic policy, Widodo has enacted successful economic reforms, instituted anti-corruption campaigns, and promoted tolerant and inclusive social policies. A popular figure in Indonesian society, particularly among the poor, Widodo enjoyed widespread public support but faced continued opposition from DPR members and societal elites who overwhelmingly supported his opponent, former General Prabowo Subianto, in the 2014 election. In the February 2024

election, Subianto won the presidency with 58.6% of the votes and assumed the office in October 2024.

Despite Widodo's successes, some analysts assert the President lacked a clear strategy to battle



rising religious intolerance (see *Religion and Spirituality*), terrorism (see "Security Issues" below), and deteriorating human rights within Indonesia. In addition, corruption continues to permeate all levels of government. While elections are generally free and fair, instances of voting fraud intermittently mar both Presidential and Parliamentary elections, most recently in 2014. Further, over the last several years, prominent government officials have been charged with corruption, while others are under investigation, notably the current Speaker of Parliament and members of Indonesia's 2 most prominent parties, PDI-P and Golkar.

Amid these challenges, Indonesians were generally optimistic about Widodo and democracy, considering the democratic process to be effective and an integral part of Indonesian national identity. Notably, Indonesia is the world's third-largest

democracy, after India and the US, conducting hundreds of regional and local elections per year. About 81% of Indonesians voted in the 2019 elections, representing one of the world's largest exercises in democracy.

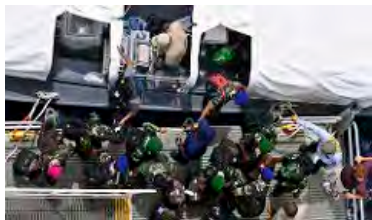
## Defense

The Indonesian National Armed Forces (**Tentara Nasional Indonesia** or TNI) consist of ground, maritime, and air branches with a joint strength of 404,500



active duty and 400,550 reserve personnel. The TNI is charged with defense of the country and ensuring domestic stability, with counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism dominating operations in recent years. Although the Army is currently the dominant armed force, Indonesia intends to substantially strengthen both Navy and Air Force branches by 2029.

In addition, increased defense spending has enabled the construction of new forward bases along Indonesia's periphery, particularly the South China Sea. Of note, some Indonesians are suspicious and distrustful of the military and police forces, accusing them of committing human rights abuses with relative impunity.



## Indonesian Army:

The Indonesian Army consists of 300,400 active-duty personnel, divided into 14 area

commands. The Army includes 107 maneuver battalions, brigades, and squadrons (including mechanized, light, and aviation); 27 combat support battalions, regiments, and units; and 3 Combat Service Support battalions. In addition, the Army includes a Special Forces Command, comprised of 3 special forces groups, as well as a Strategic Reserve Command, consisting of 3 command divisions, 37 maneuver battalions and



brigades (including mechanized, light, and air maneuver), and 7 combat support regiments and battalions.

Both the Special Forces and Strategic Reserve Commands are better-trained and equipped than the rest of the Indonesian Army.

**Indonesian Navy:** The Indonesian Navy is composed of 74,000 active-duty personnel, including 20,000 Marines and 1,000 Naval Aviation members. The Navy is organized into 2 fleets,



East (Surabaya) and West (Jakarta), and is expanding into 3 commands, Riau (West), Papua (East), and Makassar (Central). It has 4 tactical submarines, 7 principal surface combatants, 205 patrol and coastal combatants, 8 mine warfare and countermeasures vessels, 79 amphibious vessels, ships, and landing craft, and 26 logistics and support vessels.

**Indonesian Air Force:** Consisting of 30,100 active-duty personnel, the Indonesian Air Force has 2 operational commands (East and West) organized into 1 fighter squadrons,



6 fighter/ground attack squadrons, a ground attack squadron, 2 maritime patrol squadrons, tanker/transport squadron, 5 transport squadrons, 2 training squadrons, and 4 transport helicopter squadrons. It is equipped with 155 combat capable aircraft and 40 helicopters.

greater than 290,000 active-duty personnel organized into Customs, Marine Police, Police, and Coast and Seaward Defense Command branches.

**Paramilitary:** Indonesia's Paramilitary consists of

# Indonesian Air Force Rank Insignia



Marshal  
of the  
Air Force



Air Chief  
Marshal



Air  
Marshal



Air Vice  
Marshal



Air  
Commodore



Colonel



Lieutenant  
Colonel



Major



Captain



First  
Lieutenant



Second  
Lieutenant



Chief  
Warrant  
Officer



Warrant  
Officer



Sergeant  
Major



Chief  
Sergeant



First  
Sergeant



Second  
Sergeant



Chief  
Corporal



Corporal



Lance  
Corporal



Chief  
Airman



Airman  
First  
Class



Airman

## Security Issues

Indonesia faces numerous security challenges such as piracy, terrorism, internal instability, and separatist movements, which occasionally escalate to violence.

**Maritime Insecurity:** Indonesia's numerous surrounding seas and waterways have long been plagued by terrorism, piracy, and warfare. For example, the strategically and economically vital Strait of Malacca ranked as the world's most dangerous waterway in 2004, while piracy and clashes with terrorist groups are common in the northern Celebes Sea. Indonesia's military, along with their counterparts in Malaysia, Singapore, and the US, recently implemented joint anti-piracy and anti-terrorism measures to reduce the prevalence of violent incidents. Nevertheless, intermittent spates of violence continue to threaten regional stability. Finally, rising tensions in the South China Sea (see "Relations with China" below) present additional security concerns.



**Internal Instability:** Across Indonesia, small farmers and indigenous communities are occasionally forced off their own individual and community lands by large international logging, fishing, mining, and palm oil companies or by government, commercial, and industrial developments. In some cases, police and government authorities are either complicit in the evictions or fail to enforce federal protective laws. Forced to relocate to temporary camps or to urban slums, displaced Indonesians often live in dire conditions.

Although Indonesia has settled independence disputes with Aceh and Timor-Leste (see *History and Myth*), outbreaks of sectarian violence continue in the eastern province of Papua on the island of New Guinea. Violent clashes between Indonesian forces and armed separatists often result in casualties on both sides. Notably, Indonesian forces often respond with equal

severity to nonviolent pro-independence demonstrators, prompting international observers to cite the overly harsh responses as human rights violations.

**Domestic Terrorism:** Terrorism, usually fueled by religious extremism, is a rising concern across Indonesia. While several Islamist terrorist groups currently operate within Indonesia, the most prominent is the ***Jemaah Islamiyah*** (Islamic Community or JI), which developed in the 1970s and has since grown into a large, transnational organization. The JI has been linked to al-Qa'ida (a militant, broad-based Islamist group) and other terror groups in Malaysia and the Philippines. With the goal of creating a Southeast Asian Islamic state, the JI and its various splinter groups have carried out high profile terror attacks in Bali, Java, and other parts of Indonesia over the last 2 decades, leaving hundreds dead.



High rates of poverty, poor rural living conditions, and rising unemployment leave many Indonesians increasingly vulnerable to recruitment by JI and other terrorist organizations. These terrorists often lure candidates with the promise of employment and education opportunities. As Islamist extremism and tensions rise, Christians and other minorities are increasingly subjected to attacks, harassment, and intimidation by both radical Islamist groups and local police authorities (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

### Foreign Relations

Over the last decade, Indonesia has aspired to become a global and Southeast Asian regional leader, pursuing friendly political relations and close economic ties with the West and regional nations such as Australia, Timor-Leste, China, Japan, South Korea, Russia, and India. Recently, the need to address common security concerns, such as piracy, international crime, and rising terrorism (see “Security Issues” above) has facilitated

cooperative political and military relations among some of the region's nations, notably Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, and the Philippines.

As a moderate, Muslim-majority state, Indonesia strives to be a political, social, and economic model for the Islamic world. Indonesia actively participates in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the world's largest pan-Islamic organization. The OIC's 57-member nations seek to improve the image of Muslims, promote peaceful conflict resolution among member states, and counter rising Islamic extremism, among other goals.

Indonesia is also a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the G-20 group of nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Indonesia is a large contributor to United Nations peacekeeping operations and regularly participates in multilateral and bilateral military exercises with regional and

international allies, including the US, Singapore, and Australia.



### **Relations with the**

**US:** US-Indonesia relations date to 1949, when the US became one of the first nations to

establish diplomatic relations with Indonesia following its independence (see *History and Myth*). While relations became somewhat strained during the Sukarno era (see *History and Myth*), the US considered Indonesia an ally in resisting the regional spread of communism during the 1960s-80s. Following the September 11th terror attacks in the US, the 2 nations pursued closer political and security ties to reduce the strength and presence of al-Qa'ida and other Islamist terror groups in the region.

Bilateral relations deepened considerably in 2010, when the 2 nations entered into a Comprehensive Partnership (CP) to strengthen Indonesia's democracy, civil society, and education infrastructure. The CP also addresses climate, trade, domestic

terrorism, and maritime security issues. In 2015, the 2 nations further strengthened ties with the US-Indonesia Strategic Partnership, which extends bilateral cooperation beyond domestic issues to address shared regional and global strategic interests. These include security, peacekeeping, economic growth, health pandemics, and climate change.

In addition, the US regularly provides funding to Indonesia for humanitarian and disaster relief efforts and works closely with Indonesia to combat domestic terrorism and disrupt terrorist networks in Southeast Asia. As a result, the US and Indonesian militaries regularly engage in bilateral military exercises, combined training, and military education exchanges.

**Relations with ASEAN:** Indonesia is a founding member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN – made up of Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Burma, and Cambodia), created in 1967 to promote regional stability and development. As a dominant economic and political power, Indonesia is increasingly the group's de facto leader and a strong proponent of ASEAN's consensus-based model of regional coordination.



**Relations with Singapore:** Indonesia and Singapore's relationship is close but fragile. Although the 2 countries are economically interdependent and coordinate militarily against piracy and crime in the Malacca Strait, Singapore contests Indonesia's economic claim to those waters. In addition, tensions intermittently flare amid perceptions of mistreatment of Malays in Singapore and ethnic Chinese in Indonesia. Finally, Indonesia's ban on sea sand exports, a natural resource vital to Singapore's land reclamation projects undertaken to enlarge its limited territory, is another contentious issue.

**Relations with Malaysia:** Despite deep trade ties and common cultural and religious features, the Malaysian and Indonesian relationship is occasionally contentious. Maritime disputes over fishing and oil exploration rights, particularly in the Celebes Sea, periodically escalate into confrontations. In addition, porous borders allow illegal Indonesian migrant workers to travel to Malaysia, while refugees from other Muslim majority nations flow through Malaysia to seek asylum in Indonesia.



This cross-border movement, as well as Malaysia's treatment of undocumented Indonesian migrant workers, causes tension. Finally, annual fires set by

Indonesian farmers to clear land (see "Environmental Issues" above) result in heavy regional air pollution, affecting Malaysians' health and further straining relations.

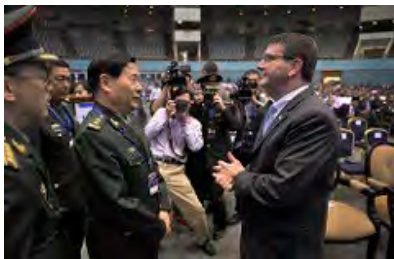
**Relations with Timor-Leste (East Timor):** Indonesia has a historically violent and contentious relationship with Timor-Leste (see *History and Myth*). While the 2 nations formally established diplomatic relations in 2002, bilateral tensions remained high as both nations struggled to control illegal border crossings, curtail drug distribution networks, and deescalate violence along their borders. Relations warmed considerably in 2011, when Indonesia supported Timor-Leste's application to ASEAN, which has yet to be approved. In 2019, the two nations signed an agreement to resolve borderline issues with talks beginning in 2020.

**Relations with Papua New Guinea (PNG):** Following the establishment of PNG as a nation on the eastern half of the island of New Guinea in 1975, Indonesia negotiated multiple bilateral treaties to establish border arrangements, promote trade, and maintain peace, yet today relations remain tense. Along the extensive and porous border, the 2 nations struggle to control the illegal movement of drugs, human trafficking, and

Papuan secessionists seeking autonomy from Indonesia's central government. Conflicts along this border occasionally escalate to violence. As a result, thousands of Indonesian refugees have fled to PNG to live in temporary camps, often in poor conditions. Although recently the 2 nations have worked to improve diplomatic relations, tensions flared in 2014 after PNG troops allegedly seized and robbed an Indonesian fishing vessel, resulting in 5 Indonesian deaths.

**Relations with the Philippines:** After nearly 20 years of negotiations to determine their maritime borders, Indonesia and the Philippines signed an agreement demarcating those borders in 2014. As both countries are prominent members of ASEAN and regional leaders, Indonesia and the Philippines have promoted this agreement as a peaceful, diplomatic, and consensus-based example of a method to resolve disputes.

**Relations with China:** Indonesia is a key player in the region's diplomatic efforts to resolve territorial disputes in the South China Sea. It historically has taken a neutral position in negotiations between China and fellow ASEAN member nations, particularly Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. Recently, however, tensions flared when China claimed territory that overlaps with Indonesian waters close to Indonesia's resource-rich Natuna Islands. Since then, several clashes between Chinese and Indonesian fishing vessels in the area have resulted in some bilateral friction.



## Ethnic Groups

Indonesia is home to over 300 distinct ethnic groups, broadly falling into 2 geographic groupings: Melanesian (eastern) and Austronesian (western). Indonesia's largest ethnic groups include the Javanese, Sundanese, Madurese, Betawi, Malay, Minangkabau, Batak, Buginese, and Chinese. Although most ethnic groups concentrate in regional pockets, members



commonly migrate across the country in search of employment and educational opportunities.

**Java's Ethnic Groups:** The primarily Muslim Javanese and Sundanese respectively comprise 40% and 16% of Indonesia's population and are by far Indonesia's largest ethnic groups. Traditionally living in small villages of fewer than 3,000 residents, Javanese and Sundanese historically worked as rice or cash crop farmers, although today, some of them hold positions in local and federal governments. Notably, both groups are famed for their puppetry traditions (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). About 3% of Indonesia's population is Madurese. Originally from the neighboring island of Madura, there are Madurese living in east Java, primarily as cattle herders. Millions of Betawi, the descendants of the various residents of Dutch Batavia (see *History and Myth*), also form a distinct ethnic group on Java.



### **Sumatra's Ethnic Groups:**

Sumatra's major ethnic groups include Malays, Bataks, Minangkabau, and Acehnese. The primarily Muslim Malays comprise 4% of the population and live in east Sumatra and coastal Kalimantan. Both the primarily Christian Bataks (about 4% of the population) and primarily Muslim Minangkabau (some 3% of the population) are related to the

Malay ethnic group. Bataks live in north Sumatra, while the Minangkabau reside in west Sumatra, typically as merchants and shopkeepers.

The Acehnese comprise about 1% of the population. The first Indonesians to embrace Islam, the Acehnese are a product of intermarriage between Arabs, Chinese, Indians, Malays, and other ethnic groups. After a decades-long separatist struggle (see *History and Myth*), Sumatra's northern Aceh province has special autonomy (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Of note, Aceh is often known as "the veranda of Mecca" for its predominantly conservative Muslim population.

**Kalimantan's Ethnic Groups:** Although migrants from other islands have come to Kalimantan (see *History and Myth* and "Social Relations" below), Kalimantan's interior is dominated by several indigenous groups collectively referred to as the Dayak. Comprising slightly over 1% of Indonesia's population, Dayak peoples were traditionally fierce warriors known for their headhunting practices, but today, they are primarily farmers. Although a majority of Dayak practice Christianity, some still practice **Kaharingan**, an indigenous blend of animism and ancestor worship (see *Religion and Spirituality*). In recent years, Dayak communities have clashed with Madurese migrants.



**Sulawesi's Ethnic Groups:**

Sulawesi is home to some 7% of Indonesia's population, most prominently the Buginese, Makassarese, Minahasan, and Toraja ethnic groups. Both the Buginese and Makassarese are renowned Muslim seafarers, while the Christian Minahasans are coastal farmers. By contrast, the largely Christian Toraja traditionally live in Sulawesi's mountains in largely self-sufficient farming villages. They are known for elaborate funeral practices (see *Family and Kinship*).

**Ethnic Groups of Maluku, Papua, and the Lesser Sunda Islands:**

Maluku's largest ethnic groups include the Butonese, Ambonese, and Ceram, which together comprise less than 1% of Indonesia's population. The provinces of Papua and West Papua are home to hundreds of distinct ethnic groups and various migrants from other islands (see *History and Myth* and "Social Relations" below). One well-known Papuan group is the Asmat, a society of hunter-gatherers that lives in small villages in the southern swamps of Papua.

The Lesser Sunda Islands, notably Bali and Nusa Tenggara, are also very diverse and home to over 50 ethnic groups.



Constituting about 2% of Indonesia's population, the Balinese are Bali's dominant ethnic group. Balinese traditionally lived in walled compounds and practiced a blend of Hinduism

and Buddhism predating Islam's arrival to Indonesia (see *History and Myth* and *Religion and Spirituality*). Like Bali, Nusa Tenggara is home to many small ethnic.

**Chinese:** Demographers estimate 3-4% of Indonesia's population are ethnic Chinese. While they live throughout the archipelago, Chinese are concentrated primarily around cities in Java, eastern Sumatra, and western Kalimantan. Chinese Indonesians are divided culturally into **Peranakan** (Chinese-Indonesians with partial Indonesian ancestry) and **Totok** ("full-blooded," often direct immigrants from China). Unlike the *Totok*, the *Peranakan* typically speak Bahasa Indonesia (see *Language and Communication*) as their native language, practice either Islam or Christianity, and feel more deeply connected to Indonesia than to China.

## Social Relations

While social roles and family organization vary among Indonesia's numerous ethnic groups, the nuclear family is the basic social unit across most of Indonesia (see *Family and Kinship*). In some cases, as among the Weyewa in Nusa Tenggara, the clan takes priority over immediate family. Still others, like the Dayak, regard both the nuclear family and community as central. Notably, while most Indonesian societies trace descent through the father (patriarchal), the Minangkabau trace descent through the mother (matrilineal), giving their women more social status and the control of property (see *Family and Kinship*). Although some Indonesian ethnic groups possess a complex and stratified class system, the Minahasan subscribe to a more egalitarian (classless) system.

Some divisions exist among Indonesia's various ethnic groups, with tensions occasionally escalating to violence. For example, some residents of other islands resent Java's historic political dominance, which at least in part fueled separatist campaigns in Aceh, Papua, and Timor (see *History and Myth*). Notably, the government's transmigration program that moved residents of densely populated islands to less populated outer islands (see *History and Myth*) often inflamed tensions between migrants and local groups. For example, in 2001, Dayak community members killed hundreds of Madurese migrants in Kalimantan, even reviving their traditional headhunting practices of beheading some individuals. Although the transmigration program has since been discontinued, tensions between indigenous populations and migrants in some areas remain high.



Indonesia's most pronounced social division lies between the Chinese and Indonesia's other ethnic groups. Historically, the Chinese have been victims of discrimination and violence. In the late 20th century, President Suharto (see *History and Myth*) attempted to assimilate ethnic Chinese into Indonesian society



by banning Chinese festivals, newspapers, and books. In 1998, rioters in Jakarta attacked Chinese businesses and individuals (see *History and Myth*). Although Indonesia has since enacted legislation to protect the Chinese community, some members still suffer discrimination. Further, some Indonesians

still resent the Chinese due to their economic success and dominance in the business sector.

### 3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

#### Overview

According to 2022 estimates, about 87% of Indonesia's population is Muslim, 8% Protestant, 3% Roman Catholic, and 2% Hindu. Another 1% follow Buddhism, Confucianism, traditional indigenous religions, or other Christian denominations. This religious diversity is reflected in the variety of mosques, temples, shrines, and churches located throughout the country.

The Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, allowing Indonesians to worship according to their personal beliefs. Nevertheless, the Constitution also restricts individuals from exercising these rights in a way that oversteps common moral boundaries, jeopardizes public order, or infringes on the



religious rights of others. Notably, the legal code also includes strict blasphemy laws that criminalize public activities and statements that defame, insult, or spread hatred of any of the 6 federally

recognized religions, including Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. While not granted official status by the government, followers of unofficial groups retain the right to establish places of worship and register marriages and births, among other rights.

Although nationally Indonesia adheres to a secular legal system that promotes religious freedom in accordance with the Constitution, some local governments across the archipelago have enacted legislation that severely limits religious freedom. Since a 2005 peace agreement that ended a separatist conflict (see *History and Myth*), Sumatra's northern Aceh province implements a restrictive form of **sharia** (Islamic) law to regulate its citizens' social and religious behavior.

Despite such regional variance, Indonesia views itself as a model of a moderate, Muslim-majority state. The federal government supports religious diversity by allowing minority religious groups to practice their beliefs and publicly promotes religious freedom across the country. In addition to Muslim holidays, Indonesia observes Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist celebrations as national holidays (see *Time and Space*).

**Early Spiritual Landscape**

Early inhabitants of Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, typically practiced animism, the belief that a spirit or consciousness resides in all objects, both animate and inanimate. Within animist traditions, all natural objects – for example, trees and animals – are sacred, and there exists a close connection between animists and their environment. Some local religious traditions in Indonesia also included volcano worship or recognized ancestral spirits who could help or hinder the living. Some of Indonesia’s indigenous groups continue to hold similar beliefs, often merging them with the ideologies of some of the 6 federally protected faiths.

**Islam**

**Origins of Islam**

Islam dates to the 6th century when Muhammad, whom Muslims consider God’s final Prophet, was born in Mecca in what is today Saudi Arabia. Muslims believe that while Muhammad was meditating in the desert, the Archangel Gabriel visited him over a 23-year period, revealing the Qur’an, or “Holy Book,” to guide their everyday lives and shape their values.



**Meaning of Islam**

Islam is a way of life to its adherents. The term Islam literally means submission to the will of God, and a Muslim is “a person who submits to God.”

## Muslim Sects

Islam is divided into 2 sects: Sunni and Shi'a. Sunnis are distinguished by their belief that the leader (*Caliph*) of the Muslim community (*Ummah*) should be elected. Conversely, Shi'a Muslims believe the religious leader should be a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

## Five Pillars of Islam

There are 5 basic principles of the Islamic faith.

- **Profession of Faith (*Shahada*):** "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is His Messenger."
- **Prayer (*Salat*):** Pray 5 times a day while facing the Ka'aba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. The Ka'aba is considered the center of the Muslim world and a unifying focal point for Islamic worship.
- **Charity (*Zakat*):** Donate a percentage of one's income to the poor or needy.
- **Fasting (*Sawm*):** Abstain from food, drink, and sexual relations from sunrise to sunset during the holy month of Ramadan.
- **Pilgrimage to Mecca (*The Hajj*):** Perform the pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime.



## Shared Perspectives

Many Islamic tenets parallel those of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, Muslims consider Christians and Jews "people of the Book," referring to biblical scriptures, because they also believe in 1 God.

**Abraham:** All 3 faiths trace their lineage to Abraham, known as *Ibrahim* in Islam. However, Christians and Jews trace their descent to Abraham, his wife Sarah, and their son Isaac; while Muslims trace theirs to Abraham and his Egyptian concubine, Hagar, and their son Ishmael.

**Scriptures:** Much of the content of the Qur'an is similar to teachings and stories found in the Christian Bible's Old and New Testaments, and Muslims view Islam as a completion of previous revelations to Jewish and Christian prophets. However, Muslims believe Jews and Christians altered God's word and that Muhammad received the true revelation of God.

**Jesus:** The 3 religions differ significantly in their understanding of the role of Jesus. While Christians consider him the divine Messiah who fulfills Jewish Scriptures, Jews are still waiting for the Messiah to come. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet but do not acknowledge his divinity or the Christian Trinity.

**View of Death:** Muslims believe that God determines the time of death and birth. While people grieve the loss of family members or friends, they do not view death itself as a negative event, as Muslims believe that a person who lived a good life goes on to live in Heaven.

### Concept of Jihad

The concept of jihad, or inner striving, is a fundamental element within Islam. Traditionally, it is the principled and moral pursuit of God's command to lead a virtuous life. It should not be confused with the publicized violence often associated with jihad. Most Muslims are strongly opposed to terrorism and consider it contrary to Islamic beliefs.

### Ramadan

Ramadan is a month-long time for inner reflection, self-control, and focus on God. During this time, Muslims who are physically able are required to fast from dawn to sunset. Many Muslims believe that denying their hunger helps them learn self-control, appreciate the difficulties of the poor, and gain spiritual renewal – by fasting, a Muslim learns to appreciate the good in life.

During Ramadan in some parts of Indonesia, authorities may fine or detain Muslims found eating or drinking on the street





during daylight hours. It is common for Indonesian Muslims to break their fast at sunset with a meal known as *iftar*. Ramadan is observed during the ninth month of the Islamic calendar (see *Time and Space*) and includes 2 holy days.

- **Lailat al-Qadr:** This “Night of Power” marks Muhammad’s receipt of the first verses of the Qur’an.
- **Eid al-Fitr:** *Lebaran* or *Idul Fitri* in Indonesia, this 3-day “Festival of Fast-Breaking” celebrates Ramadan’s end.

Another important holiday is celebrated when the *Haji* ends, about 70 days following the end of Ramadan.

- **Eid al-Adha:** *Idul Adha* or *Lebaran Haji* in Indonesia, this “Festival of Sacrifice” commemorates Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Ishmael (or Isaac, according to Christians), as proof of his loyalty to God.

### The Arrival and Spread of Islam in Indonesia

Arab and Persian Muslims on their way to East Asia probably first brought Islam to the region not long after Islam’s founding in the 6th century. In the 13th century, South Asian Muslim merchants expanded trade throughout the Strait of Malacca, further spreading Islam (see *History and Myth*). The Sufi tradition, characterized by mysticism and ritualistic prayer, shaped early Islamic practices in some regions, particularly

where Sufi beliefs aligned closely with indigenous customs, allowing Islam to more easily integrate in local society.

As Islam spread across Indonesia, 2 broad socioeconomic levels each

developed a distinct perspective on the religion. Composed primarily of rural farmers and villagers, *abangan* communities merged elements of animism and other indigenous beliefs into



their practice of Islam. For example, common *abangan* rituals incorporated ancestor worship and food offerings to appease evil spirits along with readings from the Qur'an.

By contrast, the *santri* or *putihan* were historically merchants and urban dwellers who followed orthodox Islam and strictly excluded indigenous traditions from their Islamic practices. While these classifications largely no longer apply today, some Indonesians, primarily in Java, still distinguish themselves by these *abangan* or *santri* categories.

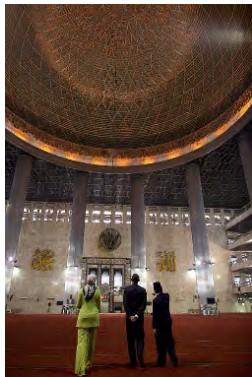
## Religion Today

### Islam

Indonesia is home to the world's largest Muslim population, larger than the Muslim population of all the Arab and Middle Eastern states combined. Most Indonesian Muslims, along with about 13% of Muslims worldwide, are followers of the Shaf'i Madhab school of Sunni Islam, a generally tolerant school of thought. An estimated 1-3 million Indonesian Muslims are Shi'a, while 200,000-400,000 are Sufi followers who adhere primarily to the Ahmediya sect. A very small percentage of Indonesian Muslims subscribe to an extreme, ultra-orthodox, and fundamentalist version of Islam



Indonesia's contemporary Muslim community lies between traditionalists and modernists. Traditionalists subscribe to Islamic teachings influenced by Sufi mysticism, often follow



known as Wahhabism or Salafism. Numerous other Muslim groups with smaller followings are also active in Indonesia.

Aside from different Islamic ideologies, another broad distinction within

charismatic Islamic leaders, and have likely attended rural **pesantren** (Islamic boarding schools) (see *Learning and Knowledge*). By contrast, modernists tend to reject Sufi mysticism, embrace modern concepts and learning, and promote moderate Islamic theologies alongside secular curricula in **madrassas** (Islamic day schools) (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

## Christianity

Christianity first gained Indonesian converts when the Portuguese and their Catholic missionaries arrived in the region in the early 16th century (see *History and Myth*). By the early 17th century, Dutch colonizers had expelled the Catholics, instead introducing Protestantism. Today, Christians comprise Indonesia's second-largest religious group, around 11% of the population. The majority (70%) of Indonesia's Christians are Protestant and reside in Central Maluku, North Maluku, North Sulawesi, and northern Papua. Meanwhile, Catholics live primarily in southern Papua, East Nusa Tenggara, and Southeast Maluku. Smaller populations of Christians also reside in West and Central Kalimantan and in Java's urban areas.

## Buddhism

According to Buddhist beliefs, human suffering resulting from greed and the desire for worldly objects can be eliminated by following an unselfish, spiritual path. Buddhists' ultimate goal is to achieve



nirvana, a state of peace and unity with the universe. Buddhism does not focus on the worship of a god or gods but instead emphasizes ethical and moral instruction.

South Asian traders introduced Buddhism to Indonesia in the first few centuries AD. An important center of Buddhist learning, the Srivijaya Empire propagated Buddhist art, culture, and beliefs within the region from the 7th-14th centuries (see *History and Myth*). Although Buddhism declined substantially as

Islam gained significant influence starting in the 13th century, Buddhist values continue to significantly influence contemporary Indonesian society.

Many Buddhists are ethnic Chinese, primarily concentrated in Java, Bali, Lampung, the Riau Islands, West Kalimantan, and the capital city of Jakarta.



Indonesian Buddhism encourages followers to be compassionate and to follow certain spiritual practices, including meditation and **halus**, the concept of politeness, a value also strongly associated with **priyayi** (see *History and*

*Myth*). Similar to other major faiths in the country, Indonesian Buddhism often incorporates elements of indigenous religions.

## Hinduism

South Asian traders also introduced Hinduism in the first few centuries AD (see *History and Myth*). Based in ancient scriptures, Hindu worship focuses on a Supreme Being with many forms and natures, including Brahma (the creator), Shiva (the destroyer), and Vishnu (the preserver). While Hindu-Buddhist empires once controlled most of Sumatra and Java (see *History and Myth*), today Bali is Indonesia's only island that remains predominantly (93%) Hindu. Smaller Hindu communities are found in the provinces of Central Java, East Java, and Lampung in Sumatra.

Notably, local traditions and beliefs have significantly influenced and transformed Hinduism in Indonesia. For example, while traditional Hindu ideology stratifies society into strict socioeconomic groups, in Indonesia today, such social divisions are less pronounced. Further, Indonesian Hinduism emphasizes ancestral spirits rather than the traditional Hindu concepts of rebirth and reincarnation.

## Confucianism

Most Indonesian followers of Confucianism focus less on the religion's philosophical underpinnings and more on its teachings as a guide for living. Generally, these teachings promote

virtuous behavior and moral perfection. Before Indonesia formally recognized Confucianism as 1 of its 6 official religions in 2006, most followers identified as Buddhist. Today, less than 1% of Indonesians are followers of Confucianism. Of these, some 95% are ethnic Chinese.

### Traditional Religions

Close to 20 million Indonesians, primarily in Java, Papua, and Kalimantan, practice 1 of 400 or more indigenous belief systems, collectively known as ***aliran kepercayaan***. While there are many variations, traditional religions commonly incorporate aspects of animism, recognizing that spirits and spiritual powers reside in animals, objects, trees, mountains and other geographic places. Generally, followers of traditional religions hold a strong respect for the spirit world, engaging in rituals to honor spirits or carrying amulets to protect themselves from harm caused by spirits.

For example, some members of Kalimantan's Dayak ethnic group (see *Political and Social Relations*) practice ***Kaharingan***, a native religion that acknowledges such spirits. While the practice is now outlawed and rarely occurs, Dayak groups traditionally practiced headhunting – the act of removing an opponent's head to prevent the spirit from reaching heaven, ensuring the victim's total destruction.



Even among Indonesians who primarily identify with an officially recognized religion, their beliefs and practices often fuse elements from several traditions. For example, although a Muslim, former President Suharto (see *History and Myth*) consulted traditional spiritual advisors and soothsayers.

### Religion and the Law

While the Indonesian government strives to promote moderate Islam and marginalize religious extremism, residents of some parts of the country – particularly in Aceh, West Sumatra,

Southern Sulawesi, and parts of Java – practice conservative forms of Islam. In some areas, local governments have introduced *sharia* law to regulate Muslim citizens' religious and social behavior. In addition, some provinces have enacted restrictive legislation that prohibits the activities of minority religious groups, such as Islamic groups like the Shi'a and Ahmediya. Other regulations require all citizens, regardless of religious affiliation, to comply with certain practices, such as abstaining from alcohol, giving Islamic alms, and closing businesses during Muslim religious holidays. Of note, Jakarta's Christian governor was convicted of blasphemy and sentenced to 2 years of prison in 2017 following statements some interpreted as insulting to the Qur'an, a result widely seen as a setback for religious tolerance (see *History and Myth*).

Amid this heightened religiosity, militant Islamic groups seem to be gaining traction and establishing terror networks across Indonesia (see *Political and Social Relations*). Members regularly harass and intimidate members of minority faiths and carry out attacks on Sufi religious sites, Christian churches, and



other places of worship. In 2020, there were 424 actions infringing on freedom of religion.

In some instances, both national and local authorities fail to prevent acts of religious intolerance or

address infractions of religious rights appropriately. In other cases, government officials themselves commit acts of intimidation, while police fail to investigate and prosecute religious crimes. For example, in 2022, state actors were responsible for 158 violations, which included 13 cases of opposition to the construction of places of worship, 23 arrests, and 15 cases outlawing religious activities, with the remaining cases mostly related to blasphemy laws.

## 4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

### Overview

Life in Indonesia traditionally centers on family and community, with the extended family acting as a mutual support network. In recent decades, family structures have shifted somewhat as younger Indonesians started migrating to urban areas seeking education and employment. While residence patterns and family-related customs and traditions vary by religion and ethnic group, Indonesians generally are respectful of elders and value social harmony.

### Residence

In rural areas, families typically live in individual homes near their extended kin (typically consists of aunts, uncles, cousins and all their immediate family members all living nearby or in the same household), although some extended families occupy communal homes or compounds. Nuclear families (2 parents and their children) are more common in urban areas and typically reside in multi-family apartment or condominium buildings. Members of extended families that do live in urban areas tend to reside near each other for mutual support and security.

**Rural:** Traditionally, the Indonesian home was the center for both social and indigenous religious activities, used to connect inhabitants to each other and the spirit world (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Indonesians customarily constructed the ***rumah tangga*** (family home) from readily-available materials such as wood, bamboo, grasses, rocks, and clay, designating separate structures for specific functions, such as cooking and bathing. These conventional homes typically sit on raised piers or stilts to protect them from flooding or to provide shelter for livestock below. Large porches or courtyards provide space for socializing.



Traditional home styles exhibit significant variation across the archipelago. In some areas, size, quality of external decoration, and roofing style historically indicate the inhabitants' social status. During the colonial era (see *History and Myth*), the Dutch constructed single-story, plastered houses with shuttered windows and steep, red-tiled roofs that are still common in Java. For the last several decades, the government has promoted the construction of simple single-story concrete homes with corrugated metal roofs, sometimes with a separate kitchen building. Despite this recent trend, traditional homes are still visible across the archipelago.

On Java, homes of the traditional elite typically include an open pavilion for hosting guests and performances (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*), as well as an open, rectangular passageway that connects the pavilion to the **dalem ageng** (inside space) used as the family's primary living quarters.

By contrast, Balinese homes traditionally encompass several small buildings placed according to strict rules of orientation and location within a walled compound. The compound typically contains a tall, arched, and carved or painted entranceway, at

least 1 bedroom with a front veranda, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a granary.

The Minangkabau of West Sumatra are known for their soaring "saddleback" roofs with multiple gables covered with carved and painted



wood panels. These **rumah gadang** (great houses) historically have accommodated multiple generations in separate sections, with a large central room open to all. The traditional **tongkonan** (origin house) of the Toraja in Sulawesi is also well-known. This impressive structure provides a place for discussion of family matters such as marriage and inheritance. It also features an upturned soaring roofline decorated at the building's front with intricate carved and painted designs.



Some members of Dayak communities in Kalimantan traditionally live in longhouses, which are narrow, extended multi-family homes with a common roof and separate rooms for several families. A covered veranda along the front serves as a focal point for socializing, preparing meals, and exchanging goods. Of note, some seafaring peoples of Sulawesi, such as the Bugis, live for extended periods on their boats.

**Urban:** About 59% of Indonesians live in urban areas where middle and upper class Indonesians occupy apartments or condominiums, typically in high-rise buildings. Others live in freestanding homes constructed of brick and cement, grouped in densely populated village-like neighborhoods called **kampungs**. Traditionally, the Chinese lived and worked in 2-story terraced houses where the family business occupied the front part of the house, with the living quarters in the back and upper story. Some Indonesian urban areas still feature these so-called shop houses.



Rapid urbanization has caused severe housing shortages in some cities. Experts predict some 68% of Indonesia's population will live in urban areas by 2025. In several cities, hastily-built homes of scrap materials designed to provide temporary shelter have become permanent housing for some. Others live in improvised shelters or are homeless, residing under bridges or in garbage dumps. Across Indonesia, some 7% of homes lack access to basic drinking water, and other areas also lack sewage services. Of note, "Jabodetabek," or Greater Jakarta – comprised of Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi – is a rapidly growing megacity currently home to over 31.6 million people.

### Family Structure

Generally, Indonesians exhibit loyalty, obligation, and respect for their family members. While Indonesians historically had large

families, more recently, overall family size has reduced through an effective government family planning campaign (see *Sex and Gender*).



Elderly family members often serve as sources of advice for younger members. The oldest male is typically head of the household. While Indonesian society is generally patriarchal, meaning men hold

most power and authority, some Indonesian groups exhibit other patterns of gender relations. For example, the Sumatran Minangkabau are matrilineal, whereby inheritance, property, and the family name (see *Language and Communication*) pass from mother to daughter.

**Polygyny:** Legal for Indonesian Muslims, polygyny is the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously. In accordance with **sharia** (Islamic) law (see *Political and Social Relations* and *Sex and Gender*), Muslim men may have up to 4 wives. Indonesian law stipulates that multiple wives are permitted only if a man can provide evidence that his first wife is unable to fulfill her responsibilities, particularly child-bearing. In practice, less than 1% of men have polygynous marriages.

### Children

Indonesian children typically live with their parents at least until marriage. After marriage, the bride and groom may move into their own quarters or join the husband's family, except among the matrilineal Minangkabau, where the groom moves into the wife's house.



**Birth:** In general, infants typically remain in close contact with their mothers after birth. A new mother may carry her baby in a sling called a **selendang** for several years. The Javanese in particular provide intensive childcare, believing youth must be sheltered in everyday life. According to a Balinese custom, an infant's feet should not touch the ground for the 105 days after birth. At the end of this period, Balinese hold a **nyabutan** ceremony to give thanks and welcome the infant into the world. Indonesians on other islands hold similar ceremonies. As children approach school age, they typically help with household chores and care for younger siblings.

**Pregnancy Customs:** In general, pregnant women are discouraged from touching sharp objects traditionally believed to harm the fetus. In Java, pregnant women often prepare a special fruit salad to sell in exchange for roof tiles. This act is intended to teach the child frugality. Further, Javanese believe the taste of the salad indicates the baby's sex – sour for a boy and sweet for a girl. During her seventh month of pregnancy, the mother gathers with family and friends for the **tujuh bulan** ceremony. This event consists of a ritual bath for the expectant mother, a community prayer for a safe delivery, and a celebratory meal.



**Circumcision:** Indonesian Muslim boys typically undergo circumcision before the age of 12, signifying their passage into adulthood and membership in the Islamic community. While traditional healers once performed this ritual at large public events, a doctor typically performs the procedure today.

Some Muslim girls experience circumcision, yet it is typically a less extreme form than practiced in many other nations (see *Sex and Gender*).

### Dating and Marriage

Dating in the Western sense is relatively uncommon in Indonesia, although young adults in urban areas often socialize

in groups. In rural areas, a young man is expected first to visit a young woman's home and get to know the family. With the family's approval, the couple may spend time together, usually conversing on the family porch.

After a period of contact, couples in both urban and rural areas seek approval for marriage from their families, followed by a celebration. Varying by ethnic group and region, engagement ceremonies typically involve the groom-to-be and his family bringing gifts and food to his future wife's home.

Generally, marriage serves as a milestone that signifies passage into adulthood. Most



Indonesians expect to marry, especially since cohabitation is illegal. While Indonesian law does not forbid interfaith marriages, it stipulates that a marriage must be performed according to the religion shared by the bride and groom. Consequently, religious conversion by either party or marriage outside the country is required.

The legal minimum marriage age is 21, yet girls and boys as young as 19 may marry with parental consent. According to the United Nations, some 16% of Indonesian girls marry before age 18, although the total number of child marriages has decreased in recent years. The courts may approve marriage at any age, and some 2% girls younger than 15 marry each year. By contrast, men tend to marry around age 24.

**Bridewealth:** It is traditional in Muslim societies for the groom's family to pay a bridewealth or *mahr* to the bride's to signify the groom's commitment and compensate for the loss of the bride's presence and labor. A legal requirement for Islamic marriages, the *mahr* may consist of cash, gold, or livestock.

**Weddings:** While wedding customs vary by ethnic and religious affiliation, most Indonesian weddings consist of a formal

ceremony followed by a celebration. For example, some Javanese share a **slametan** (ceremonial meal, though not unique to weddings) before proceeding to the district religious leader who officiates the ceremony. At this event, the couple signs the marriage contract before several witnesses. The groom also gives the bridewealth to the bride's family while presenting his bride with a **mukena** (a white drape women wear during prayers), a **sajadah** (prayer rug), **tasbeih** (prayer beads), and a Qur'an (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Weddings (**pawiwahan**) on Bali are traditionally considered a way to harmonize the earthly and spiritual worlds. Ceremonies are typically elaborate and lengthy, including a procession between the bride's and groom's houses and a purification ritual involving several symbolic activities. The couple then recite their vows before a Hindu priest. To avoid the high costs of these ceremonies, some Balinese prefer to elope, although often with their families' knowledge.



Whatever the tradition, a large feast or reception typically follows the formal ceremony. These events also incorporate local customs. For example, Javanese couples typically step on an egg to represent the start of their new life together, while Chinese couples present their parents with a gift of tea. Attendees usually give the new couple money wrapped in a red envelope.

**Divorce:** Indonesia's divorce rate has increased significantly over the past several decades.

Between 2010-14, the number of divorces administered under the **sharia** system (see *Political and Social Relations*) increased by 50%, while 80% of all civil court cases in 2010 concerned divorce. In 2023, the divorce rate was 1.6 per 1000 people. The majority of divorces were filed by women.

Experts trace the increase in divorce rates at least in part to judicial reforms, such as a 1974 law allowing women to petition

for divorce for the first time and a 1991 law limiting the husband's basis for divorce. Despite these reforms, women still face challenges to attaining a divorce and receiving court-ordered financial support, even in the case of abuse.

## Death

Funeral customs also differ by religious affiliation and ethnicity. In line with Islamic tradition, Muslim Indonesians typically bury the deceased as soon as possible, usually within 24 hours. The deceased is bathed and clothed in a white shroud. After prayers, family members transport the deceased to a cemetery for burial. The deceased's family and friends typically gather for 3 days following the death, often praying and sharing meals. This tradition is repeated on the seventh, 40th, and 100th day after death, and then annually thereafter.

Christians and Buddhists across the archipelago host an open-casket reception following a death. Afterwards, Christians commonly conduct a burial while Buddhists prefer cremation. Balinese Hindus typically perform a well-known and elaborate 3-day cremation ceremony (**ngaben**). Family members wrap the deceased in a white shroud and place the body in a coffin. Mourners then transport the coffin in a procession to a 30-ft tall, intricately-decorated tower that is subsequently burned.



Among the predominantly Christian Toraja of Sulawesi, families often delay funerals for months or even years, allowing them time to raise funds for the typically large event. A funeral usually includes the sacrifice of several water buffalo followed by a procession and several rituals to honor the deceased. Coffins typically are placed along a cliff and may be accompanied by a life-sized wooden statue of the deceased. In subsequent years, family members may occasionally open the coffin to replace the deceased's clothing and visit with their loved one.

## 5. SEX AND GENDER

### Overview

While Indonesia's traditional values privileged men over women in most spheres, women historically had some autonomy over family finances. Women's social status has improved in recent years with the achievement of gender parity in education and increased rates of female participation in politics. Although the Constitution grants men and women equal rights, the rise of conservative Islam in some regions presents challenges to gender equity.

### Gender Roles and Work

**Domestic Labor:** Traditionally, women performed most household tasks while also managing the family budget and caring for children. Even if they work outside the home, women continue to perform most domestic chores and train their daughters accordingly.

**Labor Force:** The percentage of women working outside the home has remained relatively steady over the last 3 decades. In 2024, about 56% of Indonesian women were employed in the workforce, just above neighboring Malaysia (52%) but lower than that of the US (57%). Women work in all sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and services, although women disproportionately work in informal jobs where they suffer irregular earnings and a lack of job protections.



Women in all sectors remain underrepresented in leadership positions and experience some discrimination in hiring and promotion. Further, some employers hire women as temporary workers, assuming they will leave the workforce eventually for family obligations such as motherhood. Similarly, more women are completing their education (see *Learning and Knowledge*)

but sometimes compelled to forego both employment and education due to lack of childcare services. Meanwhile, female entrepreneurs tend to lack access to credit and other resources required to build a business.

### Migrant Workers

In 2022, more than 60,000 Indonesians, some 70% of them women, labored as migrant workers. Due to inequitable or lax labor and immigration practices, some workers have suffered abuse. In 2015, Indonesia banned domestic workers from 21 countries in the Middle East and North Africa due to their sustained mistreatment. Despite the ban, some Indonesian women still travel abroad for work.

### Gender and the Law

Civil law applies to all Indonesians, but for Muslims, family law falls under the jurisdiction of **sharia** (Islamic) courts (see *Political and Social Relations*). While 1991 legal reforms required consistency in the application of Islamic law to men and women in marriage and inheritance, in practice restrictive interpretations can limit women's rights, particularly in Aceh province (see *Political and Social Relations*). For example, regulations in Aceh hinder women's rights to initiate divorce, limit women's freedom of movement by restricting unmarried men and women from socializing, and impose conservative dress codes. Further, authorities sometimes fail to enforce judicial reforms supporting a woman's right to child support following divorce (see *Family and Kinship*). As a signatory to international conventions on women's rights, the government is developing policies aimed at ending discrimination and violence against women.

### Gender and Politics

Having had a female President (see *History and Myth*), the Indonesian government continues to encourage women's increased political participation through several initiatives. For example, in the 2009 elections, the government required that 30% of Parliamentary candidates be women. Consequently, some 22% of current Parliament members are female,



significantly higher than the 2009 rate of 11% but less than the 29% in the US Congress. In the current cabinet, women make up 13% of ministerial positions. Women's participation at local levels is significantly lower. In 2024, women held just 15% of



district leadership positions, and 1 of 38 governors was female.

### **Gender Based Violence (GBV)**

While rape and domestic violence are criminal offenses, marital rape is not.

Some women do not report crimes because of the notable failure of law enforcement of such cases and the social stigma victims of sexual violence face. If victims do come forward, indictment and prosecution of perpetrators is rare and punishments are sometimes lenient. Some judges even order the victim to marry her assailant. According to the National Commission of Violence Against Women, reports of domestic violence tripled between 2010-15. In 2023, the World Economic Forum conducted the Global Gender Gap Report survey and found that 18% of women, aged 15 to 64 years old, had experienced physical and/or sexual violence in her lifetime.

In 2016, the rape and murder of a 14-year-old girl brought national attention to sexual violence against children. National outrage prompted President Widodo (see *History and Myth*) to impose harsher punishments – such as execution, chemical castration, or 20-year jail sentences – for those convicted of sexual abuse of children.

### **Female Circumcision**

Between 2010-2017, the government estimated that about 1/2 of Indonesian girls under age 14 had undergone female circumcision. In some societies, female circumcision is intended to modify the female sex organ as a means of decreasing sexual desire and promote virginity. Consequently, it can be an invasive procedure that results in physical mutilation and severe health consequences. In contrast, reports suggest that the procedure in Indonesia is usually a symbolic prick or cut. In 2006, the

government banned the procedure yet legalized it again in 2010 under pressure from Islamic groups. The law did stipulate that the procedure be performed in a noninvasive manner by a medical professional.

### Sex and Procreation

Indonesians consider sexual intimacy a private matter and tend to avoid public displays of affection. Further, adultery is illegal and punishable with a 9-month prison sentence. Primarily due to successful family planning programs, Indonesia's birthrate has dropped from 5 children per woman in 1970 to 2 in 2023.



### Homosexuality in Indonesia:

Recently, a movement against homosexuality has gained momentum in Indonesia after years of relative tolerance. Though difficult to pinpoint, some observers suggest the backlash may be due to the increased activity and prominence of conservative religious groups. In 2015, Aceh province passed a law that punishes homosexual conduct with 100 lashes.

Some Indonesian ethnic groups have gender concepts other than “male” and “female.” For example, the Bugis of Sulawesi recognize 5 genders, including men, women, feminine men, masculine women, and **bissu**, a combination of male and female said to communicate with the divine.

Indonesia's **warias** (also called **banci**) live across the archipelago. *Warias* tend to become entertainers or work in the beauty industry. Notably, one of Indonesia's most famous celebrities, Dorce Gamalama, is a *waria*. Despite some acceptance, these people face social stigma, familial expulsion, social discrimination and harassment, or are forced into prostitution.

At this time, the US State Department does not have a Status of Forces Agreement in place for Indonesia. Service members will be subject to local laws with regards to this topic.

## 6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

### Language Overview

Indonesia's official language is Bahasa Indonesia ("The Indonesian Language"), although some 710 other languages are also spoken in the archipelago. Since the 16th-century arrival of Europeans, some languages have become extinct.

### Bahasa Indonesia

A member of the Austronesian language family, the Malay language probably originated in western Borneo and then evolved further on Sumatra. Between the 6th-16th centuries, traders from the Strait of Malacca spread a Malay dialect across the archipelago (see *History and Myth*). Between the 17th-mid-20th centuries, the Dutch often used this dialect to manage their growing colony (see *History and Myth*). Muslim and Christian missionaries spread Malay still further when evangelizing their faiths (see *Religion and Spirituality*).



In 1928, independence activists named this Malay dialect Bahasa Indonesia, declaring it the language of the planned nation of Indonesia (see *History and Myth*). Over the subsequent decades, scholars advocated the standardization of the language. In 1972, the Indonesian and Malaysian governments cooperatively created today's spelling systems for Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia (or Malay), the official language of Malaysia. Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Malaysia are generally mutually intelligible, differing in some spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

Today, some 20% of Indonesians, mainly concentrated around Jakarta, speak Bahasa Indonesia as a first language.

Up to 97% of the total population is able to use it to communicate effectively. Most major government, educational, and media institutions formally use Bahasa Indonesia. Although vocabulary and pronunciation may differ between regions, most Indonesians consider the language a symbol of national unity.

While Bahasa Indonesia is sometimes written in an Arabic script called **Jawi**, the most common writing system is a Latin script known as **Rumi**. Bahasa Indonesia includes loanwords from Chinese, Dutch, English, Portuguese, and Sanskrit.

### Other Indigenous Languages

Indonesia's 710 other languages divide into 2 language groups, Austronesian and Papuan (or Melanesian). Austronesian languages are found primarily in the western part of the archipelago, while Papuan languages are spoken primarily in the East, concentrating in Papua. Of these languages, 13 each have over 1 million native speakers.

**Austronesian:** The vast majority of Indonesians speak Austronesian languages. Javanese, Sundanese, and Madurese are spoken most widely, with 83, 30, and 6.7 million speakers respectively. Other major Austronesian languages include Batak, Minangkabau, Buginese, Balinese, and Acehese.



The Javanese language is known for its particularly complex rules of social interaction. Like other Austronesian languages, Javanese speakers choose different levels or registers of speaking depending on the social context and courtesy required, thus defining the formality of the situation

and revealing the speakers' social status. Javanese has its own ancient writing system that developed following the introduction of a South Asian script in the 9th century. Today,

writers generally use a Latin script introduced by the Dutch in the early 20th century.

**Papuan:** Papuan languages are found primarily on Maluku, on some of the Lesser Sunda Islands, and in Papua. Despite Papua's small population, the region is home to some 180 ethnolinguistic groups speaking over 240 languages. Some Papuan languages are in danger of extinction.

### Chinese

Some 2 million Indonesians speak Chinese variants such as Hokkien, Hakka, and Cantonese. While many outlets for teaching and writing Chinese were banned in the late 20th century (see *History and Myth*), after 1998 the government repealed these restrictive laws. Though **Totok** Chinese are typically fluent and literate in Chinese, some **Peranakan** Chinese are not (see *Political and Social Relations*).

### English

English is widely spoken in business, government, and the tourism industry.

Because Indonesians generally consider proficiency in English a mark of high status, elite private schools often use English as the language of instruction (see *Learning and Knowledge*). By contrast, Indonesians in rural areas generally have no knowledge of the language.



### Communication Overview

Effective communication in Indonesia requires not only knowledge of Bahasa Indonesia or other local languages but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralinguistic (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly,

these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

## Communication Style

Communication patterns may vary significantly across the archipelago, yet most Indonesians place great value on respect during communications. Above all, Indonesians try to avoid feeling or causing others to feel **malu** (embarrassment or shame).

Indonesians typically alter their communication patterns depending on their conversation partner's place in the social hierarchy. Even so, Indonesians are often friendly with family, friends, and strangers alike. To avoid offense, Indonesians tend to refrain from directly mocking, criticizing, disagreeing, or otherwise responding negatively in a conversation. Notably, Bahasa Indonesia has several polite words and phrases that translate as "yes" yet imply uncertainty or disagreement.

Some Indonesians avoid direct eye contact during conversations (see *Time and Space*). They are generally more comfortable than Westerners with long conversational pauses, some lasting as long as 15 seconds. While Javanese tend to speak rather softly, Batak tend to speak louder than Westerners typically do.



## Greetings

Greetings can vary across the archipelago, although Indonesians generally say **Halo** (hello). Muslims often greet one another by saying **Selamat** (peace) or **Assalaam 'alaikum** (may peace be upon you), with the response **Wa 'alaikum**

**assalaam** (and upon you be peace). Following verbal greetings, Indonesians often shake right hands (see *Time and Space*). During the handshake, some people use both hands to clasp the other's hand. After shaking hands, Indonesians tend to touch their hands to their heart. Instead of shaking hands to greet each other, Indonesian women typically brush cheeks.

Greetings between men and women are often nonphysical, comprising a slight nod and a brief verbal exchange. In other cases, men and women may clasp their own hands together and with interlocked fingers touch the fingertips of the other person. While some women may extend their hands for a light handshake, foreign nationals should generally wait for members of the opposite sex to initiate the greeting.



### Names

Indonesian naming conventions vary significantly. While

Javanese traditionally have just a single name (such as Sukarno or Suharto), Balinese traditionally have up to 4 names that indicate their birth order and caste membership. By contrast, Bataks often adopt a clan name as a last name. Among the Minangkabau, the mother's family name is traditionally passed on to her children (see *Family and Kinship*).

Today, Indonesians typically have 1, 2, or even 3 names, and some have adopted a family name. Indonesians sometimes list different names in various public records that also differ from nicknames used in daily life. For example, former Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, widely known as Gus Dur, was born Abdurrahman Addakhil.

### Forms of Address

Indonesians use distinct forms of address to demonstrate respect and the nature of the relationship. While hierarchical conventions are particularly prominent in Javanese, they are also used in Bahasa Indonesia.

When speaking Bahasa Indonesia, Indonesians often address superiors or elders with **ibu** (mother) or **bapak** (father). These may be abbreviated to **bu** (Ms., Mrs., or ma'am) and **pak** (Mr. or sir). Indonesians may alternatively use honorifics from other

languages. For example, the term **Gus** typically is used to address Eastern Javanese men.

### Conversational Topics

Following greetings, Indonesians usually discuss the weather, their families, sports, food, or business. To further establish rapport, foreign nationals should explore common interests, such as soccer or badminton (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). Indonesians sometimes ask personal questions concerning a person's background, education, and family. Far from violating rules of politeness, Indonesians typically use such questions to gauge a stranger's social position.

Foreign nationals should avoid discussing potentially sensitive



topics like Indonesia's human rights record, religion, and politics. While locals may use humor, foreign nationals should exercise caution when making jokes to avoid misunderstandings.

### Gestures

Indonesians sometimes use gestures to replace or emphasize spoken words. For example, to beckon, Indonesians usually motion towards themselves with their right hand palm down and with the fingers flexed towards the ground. Indonesians consider it courteous to smile and nod even if they do not understand a conversation.

Indonesians generally consider it offensive to show the soles of feet to another person, place hands on another person's head, in one's pockets or on the hips. It is also considered rude to point at someone with a single finger rather all of them.

### Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at [www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/](http://www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/) and click on "Resources" for access to language training and other resources.



## Useful Words and Phrases

English	Bahasa Indonesia
Hi / Hello	Halo
Good morning (until 11am)	Selamat pagi
Good afternoon (11am-3pm)	Selamat siang
Good evening (3-6pm)	Selamat sore
My name is ____	Nama saya ____.
What is your name?	Siapa nama anda?
How are you?	Apa kabar?
Fine	Baik
Where are you from?	Dari mana?
Please	Tolong
Thank you	Terima kasih
You're welcome	Terima kasih kembali
Yes / No	Ya / Tidak
Goodbye	Selamat tinggal
Good night	Selamat malam / tidur
Do you speak English?	Anda bisa bicara bahasa inggris?
I (don't) understand	Saya (tidak) mengerti
Sorry	Maaf
Excuse me	Maaf / Permisi
Help!	Tolong!
I want ____	Saya mau ____
What?	Apa?
Where?	Di manakah?
Who?	Siapa?
How?	Bagaimana?
How many / much?	Berapa?
Congratulations	Selamat.
What time is it?	Jam berapa sekarang?

## 7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

### Literacy

- Total population aged 15 and older who can read and write: 96%
- Male: 97.4%
- Female: 94.6% (2020 estimate)

### Traditional Education

While approaches to education historically varied across the archipelago, most Indonesians traditionally used informal, experience-based, and oral teaching methods to transmit values, skills, historical knowledge, and religious beliefs and practices to younger generations.

### Formal Education until the 20th Century

Between the 6th-14th centuries, royal courts on Sumatra and Java encouraged Hindu-Buddhist scholarship and literature (see *History and Myth and Aesthetics and Recreation*). As Islam spread across Indonesia between the 13th-15th centuries (see *History and Myth*), scholars known as **kyai** founded **pesantren** (Islamic boarding schools) to provide predominantly male students instruction in Arabic and the Qur'an (see *Religion and Spirituality*). These schools were influential for centuries, often inspiring opposition to the Dutch during the colonial era.



### Formal Education in Colonial Indonesia

Between the 16th and the late 19th centuries, the Dutch provided very few educational opportunities for Indonesians. Beginning in 1901, the Dutch Ethical Policy (see *History and Myth*) provided some funding for education, allowing the construction of various types of schools, primarily on Java.

These included institutions to train native government officials, Dutch-language primary schools for the children of Indonesian elites, and local-language **sekolah desa** (village primary schools) for the wider Indonesian population.

While the Dutch wanted to create a skilled native elite loyal to the colonial administration, they generally feared mass education would lead to rebellion. Consequently, opportunities remained limited. Even in 1930, less than 0.2% of the population had attended Dutch schools, while less than 3% had studied in *sekolah desa*. Just 7.5% of the population was literate.

The colonial administrators' fears proved well-founded. Beginning around 1908, Dutch-educated Indonesians began forming new organizations (see *History and Myth*) that also sought to extend educational opportunities. Within a few years, these students had established their own schools, which further inspired nationalist resistance. A 1932 Dutch attempt to restrict these schools was unsuccessful. By 1940, Indonesians funded and ran numerous private schools offering a modern, nationalist education.

### Education after Independence

Upon declaring independence in 1945, and even before achieving it in 1949 (see *History and Myth*), Indonesia focused on educational development. These efforts were largely successful – by 1961, 47% of the population was literate.



Between 1950-70, the number of higher educational institutions grew from 10 to around 450.

Upon taking power in 1968 (see *History and Myth*), Suharto prioritized education as a means of producing loyal, skilled

citizens. Consequently, his regime built or repaired nearly 40,000 primary schools between 1973-90. In 1978, schools began to teach courses in Pancasila, the national ideology (see *History and Myth*).

Amidst ongoing school construction in the 1980s, the government struggled to find qualified teachers. Beginning with the 1997-98 financial crisis (see *History and Myth*), education budgets declined for several years.

### Modern Education System

Over the last 2 decades, Indonesia has invested substantial resources into its education system, typically spending at least 3 % of GDP on education, lower than the US average (6%) but higher than Singapore (2%). Since 2015, it has realized 2 major goals: closing the gap in attendance at all levels between girls and boys and achieving universal primary education. Further, the gap in attendance between rural and urban areas has also reduced significantly.

Despite these gains, challenges remain. Access to education remains uneven disproportionate across the archipelago. Rural schools, particularly outside Java and Madura, often lack teachers, books, or basic supplies. Quality of instruction also remains a concern: around 10-20% of teachers do not hold the minimum qualifications required by the government, and some 3% of students must repeat grade 1 because they do not attain the minimum standards. In a 2018 international assessment of educational attainment, Indonesia ranked 71st of 78 countries. Finally, due to poverty, some 1 million Indonesian children must work to support themselves and their families, disrupting or ending their education.

Historically, costs for incidental items, such as uniforms and textbooks, forced some poorer families to withdraw their children from school. In part due to these obstacles, only 90% of Indonesian children completed 9 years of education in 2017. In an attempt to improve participation rates, President Joko Widodo (see *History and Myth*) introduced the “Indonesia Smart Card” in



2014. Provided annually by the government, the pre-loaded card allows needy children to purchase supplementary school items such as supplies and uniforms. Eventually, the government hopes to distribute some 20.3 million such cards.

The Indonesian education system consists of 12 years divided into primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary programs. As of 2013, all 12 years are mandatory. The primary language of instruction is Bahasa Indonesia (see *Language and Communication*), though local regional languages may be used in the first 3 years of primary school.

In 2014, the Ministry of Education designated 3 formal categories of schools: national, joint cooperation (SPK), and foreign. Most Indonesians attend national schools, either public or private, which typically follow a standardized curriculum focusing on preparation for national examinations. Some



Indonesians attend SPK schools, which along with international curriculum, provide instruction in Islam, Indonesian civics and history, and Bahasa Indonesia in preparation for the national examinations. Schools falling into the third category, foreign

education institutions, are reserved solely for non-Indonesian citizens.

While school hours and schedules vary, most national schools provide instruction Monday-Saturday. Aside from 1/2-days on Fridays, school hours typically run from 7am-1pm. Some private and public schools currently have a 5-day school week, and the Education Ministry is considering implementing such a schedule nationwide. On average, classes have under 24 students, similar to many other Asian countries.

**Pre-Primary:** While pre-primary education is optional in Indonesia, its quality and access vary across the archipelago. Some communities and private providers offer childcare centers

for 2-4-year-olds and kindergarten facilities for 4-6-year-olds. These programs can be either secular or religious-based. As of 2021, some 36% of children of the appropriate age attended pre-primary programs.

**Primary:** Indonesia's primary education program consists of 6 grades starting at age 6 or 7. In 2020, some 90% of Indonesian children of the appropriate age were enrolled in primary school. Much of the curriculum including religious education, language, civics, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, art, and physical education is national. Consequently, schools typically set aside time for "local content" relevant to the specific district or province. Students must pass an exam to move on to secondary school.

**Secondary:** The junior secondary program consists of grades 7-9 and senior secondary grades 10-12. After completing junior secondary, students must pass a national exam on subjects



such as Bahasa Indonesia, English, mathematics, and science to continue to senior secondary school. Upon completing grade 12 and passing an exam specific to their studies, students receive a national certificate and become eligible to pursue higher education.

Some secondary schools offer general education, though after 10th grade, students choose a focus on the natural sciences, social sciences, language, or religion. Other secondary schools offer specialized instruction and training for specific professions. Such institutions include technical and vocational schools, scientific schools, pre-professional schools, "in-service" schools for future civil servants, and religious schools.

### **Post-Secondary Education**

As of 2017, Indonesia was home to over 4,498 institutions of higher learning, including universities, academies and colleges, polytechnics, and specialized institutes. While 92% of these

institutions are private, public institutions accounted for almost 37% of 8.3 million students in 2018. Compared with other countries in the region, relatively few Indonesians move on to post-secondary studies, resulting in a shortage of professional and managerial staff across all economic sectors. Although the recent focus has been on improving the primary and secondary levels, President Widodo has also prioritized post-secondary education, linking it to other initiatives in research and technology. Notable post-secondary institutions include the University of Indonesia, Bandung Institute of Technology, and Gajah Mada University (see *History and Myth*).

Two notable challenges plaguing higher education today include widespread misallocation and misappropriation of funds and outdated methods of instruction. Similarly, overall education



quality is poor, and graduates rarely meet labor market standards and requirements.

### Religious Education

By law, public schools must offer religious instruction, and students cannot opt out. Students must

choose instruction in 1 of Indonesia's 6 officially-recognized religions (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Consequently, this policy results in discrimination against practitioners of unrecognized religions, like Indonesia's traditional belief systems or certain Islamic sects (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Over the past 15 years, some schools have adopted policies favoring Islam, such as requiring Qur'an recitation or imposing a certain dress code. Moreover, a 2013 curriculum change merging science and social studies lessons to allow more time for religious instruction has been controversial.

Some children attend state-run or private Islamic schools, such as *pesantren* and **madrassas**, day schools. *Madrassas* usually have the same grade structure as non-religious schools and often offer technical and vocational training.

## 8. TIME AND SPACE

### Overview

Indonesians consider social harmony, consensus, respect, and trust fundamental to building strong personal and professional relationships. While public displays of affection are common among members of the same sex, social touching between unrelated Indonesians of the opposite sex is considered inappropriate.

### Time and Work

Indonesia's workweek runs from Monday-Friday or Saturday, and business hours vary by establishment type. While public sector employees generally work from 8:00am-4:00pm, private businesses often open from 9:00am-5:00pm. Some offices have reduced hours on Friday and consequently open on Saturday from 8:00am-noon or 2:00pm. During Ramadan (see *Religion and Spirituality*), the workday is typically shorter.



Most banks open from 8:00am-3:00pm Monday-Thursday, with reduced hours on Friday and Saturday. Post offices typically open Monday-Friday from 8:00am-2:00pm. While some shops open from 9:00am-8:00pm, others stay open later. Some stores are closed on Sundays. Some banks, post offices, and shops stay open later in urban centers than in rural areas. Although most businesses close on public holidays, some small vendors, large stores, and supermarkets in urban areas remain open.

**Working Conditions:** Indonesia's legal workweek consists of 40 hours with up to 14 hours overtime. Indonesians working in agriculture or informal sector jobs typically exceed the legal limit (see *Economics and Resources*). Although labor laws provide regulations to protect workers, the government often lacks enforcement capacity. As a result, forced labor, child labor (see *Learning and Knowledge*), and other abuses occur. Indonesians



in the formal and public sectors receive paid public holidays and 12 days of annual paid leave.

**Lunar Calendar:** Indonesians use the *Hijri* (Islamic) calendar to track Muslim holidays. Since it is based on lunar phases, dates fall 11 days earlier each year in relation to the Western calendar. The Islamic calendar's 12 months each have 30 days or fewer. Days begin at sunset on what the Western calendar would show as the previous day. For example, each new week begins at sunset on Saturday, and the Muslim holy day of Friday begins on Thursday evening.

**Time Zone:** Indonesia has 3 time zones: Western (WIB), Central (WITA), and Eastern Indonesian Time (WIT), which respectively are 7, 8, and 9 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 12, 13, and 14 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time (EST). Of note, Java and Sumatra follow WIB, and Indonesia does not observe daylight savings time.

### National Holidays

- January 1: New Year's Day
- January/February: Chinese New Year
- March/April: **Nyepi** (Hindu New Year and Balinese Day of Silence)
- March/April: Good Friday and Easter Sunday
- April/May/June: **Waisak** Day (Buddha Day)
- May/June: Ascension Day of Jesus Christ
- August 17: Independence Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

These holidays occur on variable dates according to the lunar calendar:

- **Muharram:** Islamic New Year
- **Maulid Nabi:** Birth of Prophet Muhammad
- **Isra Mi'raj Nabi:** The Ascension of Muhammad
- **Lebaran / Idul Fitri:** End of Ramadan
- **Lebaran Haji / Idul Adha:** Festival of Sacrifice

(see *Aesthetics and Recreation*)

## Time and Business

Business tends to move slower in Indonesia than in the US, primarily because Indonesians consider time flexible which means deadlines and appointments are more fluid than in the US. Accordingly, business meetings may not start on time or run late. Further, Indonesians typically prefer to build trust and personal relationships before doing business. Indonesians generally appreciate punctuality in business but consider arriving late to a meeting acceptable given prior notification. While most business discussions occur during scheduled office



meetings, informal meetings in other locations or during meals are also common.

After initial greetings (see *Language and Communication*), Indonesians typically begin meetings by sharing tea or coffee and conversation

about family. Some business partners use humor or exchange gifts such as flowers and sweets to establish rapport. Indonesians value negotiation and prefer indirect forms of communication to gauge a business partner's intentions.

The Indonesian workplace is hierarchical, meaning deference to age, education, and experience are foremost. Senior officials and upper management tend to behave as evenhanded parental figures. While managers usually chair meetings and make decisions, reaching consensus usually involves informal and consultative discussions with lower-level employees. Indonesian businessmen often use third-party arbiters to conduct informal negotiations prior to high-level meetings and deliver feedback and criticism in private to avoid conflict and embarrassment.

## Personal Space

As in most societies, the use of personal space depends on the nature of the relationship. Indonesians tend to maintain about an

arm's length when conversing with strangers or people of the opposite sex and stand closer to family and friends.

**Touch:** Close friends and relatives commonly touch one another during conversation. Friends of the same sex sometimes hold hands in public, signaling their deep platonic friendship. The public display of affection between opposite sexes typically is considered inappropriate (see *Sex and Gender*), particularly if the individuals are unrelated.

Indonesians use the right hand when eating, gesturing, passing and accepting items, and shaking hands because traditionally the left hand is used for personal hygiene and considered unclean. Indonesians also typically avoid touching another person's head, which is considered sacred. Foreign nationals should adhere to these customs to avoid offense.

### Eye Contact

Indonesians generally consider frequent and direct eye contact as suspicious or threatening. They usually maintain intermittent eye contact during an initial meeting but less so in subsequent ones. Most Indonesians gaze downward when speaking with elders and superiors as a sign of respect.

### Photographs

Military or government offices, mosques, airports, and other similar locations typically prohibit photography. Foreign nationals should always acquire permission before taking an Indonesian's photo.

### Driving

Driving in Indonesia can be hazardous. Roads are often narrow and crowded with traffic, pedestrians, and animals. In 2021, Indonesia's rate of traffic-related deaths was 11 per 100,000 people, less than the US rate of 14. Traffic enforcement suffers from corruption, and officials sometimes accept bribes instead of issuing fines. Unlike Americans, Indonesians drive on the left side of the road.



## 9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

### Overview

Indonesia's traditional dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect its ethnic and religious diversity, centuries of foreign trade and occupation, agricultural traditions, and modern global trends.

### Dress and Appearance

**Traditional:** Indonesia's traditional attire remains fashionable, mostly in rural areas. Some residents wear it in the workplace, others only at home following the workday. Specific styles and fabrics vary across the archipelago, reflecting local customs. Traditional



dress is typically made of brightly-dyed cotton or silk and embroidered with vibrant colors. A particularly common style is **batik**, a fabric created by applying hot wax to cloth, then painting or dyeing it before removing the wax to reveal intricate designs. While native to Java, *batik* is worn in other parts the region as well. Also popular, **ikat** is an older dyeing technique similar to tie-dye, a method of using pre-treated threads that do not absorb dye.

Both men and women traditionally wear a **sarung**, a long cloth sewn at the ends to form a step-in tube wrapped around their waists. *Sarungs* often consist of bright *batik* or checkered designs. With the *sarung*, women typically wear a long-sleeved blouse or **kebaya**, an embroidered and fitted shirt made of silk, cotton, or nylon that extends either to the waist or knees and often secured with a broach. Some women prefer a looser **baju** (tunic) over the *sarung*. While men in Java and Bali favor *sarungs*, men from other islands tend to wear **selimut** – an *ikat* cloth wrapped around the body from the waist to the knees. Men typically wear a loose shirt or a shoulder cloth matching the *sarung* or *selimut*.

Another traditional style is the **kain**, a 3-yd-long cloth similar to a **sarung** that both men and women wrap around the waist or entire body, forming different styles depending on location and level of formality. A **kain** is multifunctional, often used as a satchel or baby sling. Women typically wear a **batik kain** with a matching **selendang** (shawl) draped over one shoulder.

Some Indonesians wear head coverings that reflect local customs or their religion. For example, Muslim women sometimes wear a **kerudung** (headscarf) or the more conservative **jilbab** head covering. Men typically wear a **peci** (a cylindrical velvet cap), also known as a **kopiah** in Aceh and a **songkok** in Sulawesi. Other caps include the **blangkon** made from folded Javanese **batik** fabric, and the **iket**, a Sundanese version.

**Modern:** Some Indonesians, particularly youth and urban residents, wear clothing that reflects the latest Western fashion trends or a combination of traditional and Western styles. For example, a button-down shirt with **batik** patterns is particularly



popular among urban men. Men also commonly wear denim jeans, slacks, or knee-length shorts with casual t-shirts or long-sleeved shirts. Women typically wear bright dresses or blouses with skirts that fall knee-

length or longer. In business settings, Indonesians tend to wear Western-style suits or dresses and other conservative business attire.

### Recreation and Leisure

Indonesians typically spend their free time with family and friends. Some Indonesians socialize at home over meals or coffee or while weaving or making traditional handicrafts. Outside the home, Indonesians typically frequent local markets, shops, cafes, and food stalls. Other common activities include

watching TV, storytelling, dancing, fortune telling, karaoke, kite flying, game playing, cockfighting (legal only in Bali), and gambling (illegal). Men often chew betel nut or smoke while socializing (see *Sustenance and Health*).

On weekends and holidays, Indonesian families often visit local parks, beaches, or mountains. City residents typically visit the countryside or their hometown. Most Indonesians cannot afford extended vacations. Wealthy Indonesians may travel to local tourist sites such as Bali, Komodo Island, or Borobudur temple (see *History and Myth*), or to international destinations.

**Festivals:** Every year, Indonesians hold hundreds of local and national festivals to celebrate holidays or cultural and seasonal events. The festivities surrounding **Lebaran**, also known as **Idul Fitri**, occur at the end of Ramadan (see *Religion and Spirituality*) and are the largest, typically lasting for a week or longer. Indonesians commonly buy new clothing, prepare lavish feasts, light firecrackers, and visit friends and family with sweets and gifts. Other notable Islamic festivals include **Lebaran Haji**, also known as **Idul Adha**, when Indonesians sacrifice a lamb or goat and hold a feast, and **Maulid Nabi**, the birth of the Prophet Muhammad.

**Nyepi** celebrates the Hindu New Year and Balinese Day of Silence. Held in March or April, **Nyepi** is believed to drive out evil spirits at night with fireworks and drums.



The next day, participants stay quietly indoors to convince the spirits that no one lives on the island. During **waisak**, Buddhists celebrate the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha by gathering at the Borobudur temple in Java for a flower-filled prayer procession. Christian Indonesians typically celebrate Good Friday and Easter with large feasts and gatherings, often holding Easter egg hunts and reenactments of the crucifixion.

Other festivals celebrate national holidays like Independence Day and New Year's Day or rejoice seasonal events, such as the monsoon or good harvests. The Bau Nyale Fishing Festival

in Lombok occurs every February or March to celebrate the season's first catch of **nyale** fish. Other popular festivals include the Bali Arts Festival, the Galungan Hindu Festival in Bali, the International Jazz Festival of Jakarta, and the Krakatoa Festival in Lampung – a memorial for the deadly Krakatoa volcanic eruption of 1883. Kartini Day festivities honor Indonesia's first women's rights campaigner.



## Sports and Games

**Sports:** Indonesians enjoy a variety of traditional sports. Martial arts such as **pencak silat**, an ancient form that developed on Sumatra

around the 7th century and features knives and sticks are widely popular. Another is **sisemba**, a martial-art from Sulawesi that prohibits the use of the hands. Similar to hacky sack, the game of **sepak takraw** involves 2 teams tossing a rattan-fiber ball over a net without using their hands.

The most popular sport is football (soccer). Played across the archipelago, Indonesia is home to hundreds of regional club teams. **Futsal**, a compact indoor form of soccer, is popular in cities. Other common sports include badminton, volleyball, tennis, basketball, and cycling. Home to world-champion badminton players, Indonesia won its first Olympic gold medal in badminton at the 1992 Barcelona games. At the 2016 Rio de Janeiro games, Indonesia triumphed again, winning the mixed doubles gold medal. Indonesians also consistently medal in weightlifting events. Though legal only in Bali, cockfighting is a popular spectator sport among men, especially in Kalimantan and Bali. Residents of Madura and East Java enjoy bull racing.

**Games:** **Congklak** is a popular 2-person board game in which players try to capture an opponent's game pieces. Card games, checkers, and chess are other popular pastimes, along with building, flying, and sometimes fighting kites. While young boys typically play with marbles or handmade wooden spinning tops, girls prefer to jump rope, hopscotch, or play a game similar to jacks.

## Music

**Traditional:** Indonesia has a rich variety of traditional music, orally passed down through generations. Today, it is customary to perform folk music at puppet theater shows (see “Theater” below), weddings, festivals, and special occasions. **Gamelan** is a metallic percussion ensemble featuring gongs, xylophones, drums, metallophones, **kendang** (2-headed drums), **rebab** (a bowed string instrument), and **saron demung** (similar to a xylophone).

Dating back over a millennium, *gamelan* has a light, fluid sound with regular rhythms. A complete *gamelan* group includes 2 orchestras, typically with 10-40 performers. Female singers called **pesinden** and a male chorus known as **gerong** often accompany *gamelan* performances with songs and banter, particularly during puppet theater shows. Of note, no 2 *gamelans* sound alike because each instrument is tuned specifically to fit the particular ensemble.



While other traditional music forms are also percussion-based, some, such as **kacapi** and **sampé**, feature string instruments, flutes, zithers, and **angklung**, an instrument made from bamboo tubes within a bamboo frame. The guitar and other Western string instruments feature prominently in newer musical forms, such as **keroncong**, a genre popular during the colonial era (see of *History and Myth*).

**Modern:** Contemporary music in Indonesia typically fuses various styles. Popular throughout the archipelago, **dangdut** is a synthesis of local, Malay, Arab, and Indian varieties. Rhoma Irama was a popular 1970s *dangdut* star and still known as the “King of Dangdut.” Today, Inul Daratista, Cita Citata and others are popular dangdut artists. In recent years, Indonesian pop music known as “Indo-pop” has gained a huge following within the country and throughout Asia. Indonesians also enjoy Western pop music, jazz, rock-and-roll, and other genres.



## Theater

The most notable Indonesian art form is **wayang** (theater), which likely originated in Java before 900 AD and comprises several varieties. **Wayang kulit** (shadow puppet theater) includes a **dalang** (narrator) who operates ornately carved and painted 2-dimensional leather puppets on buffalo bone handles. The **dalang** manipulates the puppets before a lighted screen so that only their silhouettes appear. Meanwhile, the **dalang** employs various voices and literary devices to narrate the action, from poetry to coarse humor. In **wayang golek**, a puppeteer manipulates elaborate wooden rod puppets to tell Islamic stories

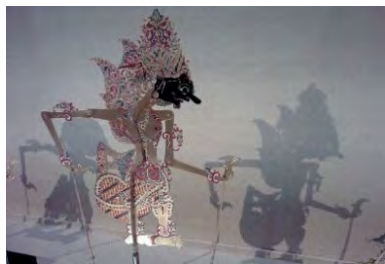
known as **menak**, or adaptations of the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

**Wayang topeng**, or **wayang gedog**, is another theatrical form in which human actors wear large painted masks to act

out legends, myths, and historical events. In the Javanese form of **wayang wong**, actors typically reenact stories from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, often accompanied by *gamelan* or other musical and dance performances. *Wayang* performances in Java and Sumatra typically last all night, while those in Bali are usually shorter. During certain parts of the show, some audience members interact with the **dalang** or the actors, creating a boisterous atmosphere.

## Dance

Traditional Indonesian dances demonstrate significant variety, from formal classical temple dances to informal energetic folk dances. In the Balinese **legong**, 3 young girls expressively move their arms, hands, heads, and eyes with a *gamelan* accompaniment. The **kecak** (monkey dance) includes up to 100 men sitting in a circle making synchronized sounds around 1 or 2 dancing women. Other forms are gender-specific, such as the women's **serimpi** on Java and **pakarena** on Sulawesi, and the men's **seudati** in Aceh and **kancet laki** in eastern Kalimantan.



Other dances such as the Balinese *janger* include women and men.

Traditional dance and music are often central components of martial arts and theater performances. For example, *randai* is a Sumatran narrative performance in which a hero defeats a villain using *pencak silat* martial arts moves and circular dance motions, accompanied by instruments and clapping. Over time, dance traditions from Asia, Europe, and the Middle East have also influenced Indonesian dances. A modern dance called *joget* often accompanies the lively Indonesian, Indian, Malay, and Arab rhythms of *dangdut* music. Another traditional theatrical dance called *sendratari* has adopted movements and styles from contemporary Asian and Western dances.



### Literature

Early Indonesian folklore and folk poetry were primarily orally transmitted as epics, performances, and court songs exploring a range of themes. Many of these oral traditions were influenced by South Asian literature beginning in the 8th century, such as the Hindu epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

The 13th-century spread of Islam (see *History and Myth*) introduced the Arabic script and new literary and poetic styles, which began to meld with local traditions. For example, the *hikayat* chronicles, stories of local heroes and royal adventures, were written in a Malay language with the Arabic script. Meanwhile, Javanese wrote romantic poetry called *kakawin* on leaves and wood strips. In the 14th century, literature in Old Javanese flourished. Notable works include the *Nagarakretagama*, a eulogy to the king of the Majapahit Empire (see *History and Myth*), and the *Kakawin Sutasoma*, a poem featuring Indonesia's national motto, "Unity in Diversity."

Rising nationalist movements prompted the growth of native literature in the early 20th century. In 1933, the literary magazine *Poedjangga Baroe* (New Poet) began printing in Bahasa

Indonesia (see *Language and Communication*). Japanese occupation during World War II sparked additional nationalist literary advances (see *History and Myth*).

Pramoedya Ananta Toer is Indonesia's most prolific author, producing novels, stories, poems, and political essays before his death in 2006. Imprisoned by the Dutch and then the Suharto regime (see *History and Myth*), Toer's most famous work is the *Buru Quartet*, a tetralogy named for the prison where he was held. His works on Dutch and Japanese occupation, national movements, and political repression won him significant international acclaim.

Since the end of the repressive Suharto regime in 1998, Indonesia's literary scene has flourished. Prominent authors include Dewi Lestari, Andrea Hirata, Okky Madasari, Eka Kurniawan, and others who explore life under Suharto, modern challenges, rural life, love, and spirituality. While Toer's works have been translated, most Indonesian works are not. For this reason, Indonesian authors and poets often remain unknown to readers outside the country.



### Arts and Handicrafts

Indonesia has a rich tradition of arts and handicrafts, many of which were first created as practical tools, clothing, or weapons. Traditional handicrafts include woodcarvings, masks, textiles, pottery, basketwork, metalwork, and jewelry. These works reflect remarkable variety, and most regions have their own local traditions. For example, the carved masks in Kalimantan feature highly stylized people, dragons, tigers, and other animals, while Javanese masks often depict characters in theater productions. Similarly, *batik* fabric designs and *wayang* theater puppets vary in their detail and quality, depending on the artist and local traditions. Once considered a mystical weapon with magical properties, the **keris** (dagger) is a traditional weapon of self-defense and a well-known symbol of Indonesian culture.

## 10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

### Sustenance Overview

Extensive and varied, Indonesia's cuisine reveals the region's history as an international trading center. While the Chinese introduced soy products and noodles, Portuguese traders brought peanuts and sweet potatoes. Indian influence is evident in the widespread use of spices such as curry, coriander, cumin, and ginger.

### Dining Customs

Indonesians commonly eat 3 daily meals along with several snacks. To begin a meal, the host typically says ***silakan makan*** (please eat). At home, the eldest family member is served first followed by the remaining family members in order of age. The mother may wait to eat after her children are finished.

Indonesians typically eat with their right hand, using their fingers

and thumb to scoop food into their mouths. They clean their fingers before a meal in a small water bowl.

Indonesians avoid eating with the left hand (see *Time and Space*). In urban areas, utensils are more common,

although knives are rarely used since food is cut prior to being served. Chinese Indonesians sometimes eat with chopsticks.



### Diet

Cultivated for centuries (see *History and Myth*), rice is the staple of Indonesian cuisine. It is consumed for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and prepared in a variety of ways – fried, steamed, simmered with coconut milk, formed into patties (***lontong***), or flavored with spices. On the eastern islands, corn, cassava (a starchy tuberous root), and sweet potatoes may replace rice.

Indonesian cuisine typically incorporates spices such as cumin, lemongrass, ginger, tamarind, nutmeg and coriander. **Sambal** – a chili paste made from oil, shallots, garlic, sugar, salt, and shrimp paste – and peanut sauces are also common



seasonings. Common vegetables include watercress, spinach, and carrots. Tropical fruits such as jackfruit, papaya, banana, and mango are used in both savory and sweet dishes.

Some Indonesians adhere to certain dietary restrictions. For example, observant Muslims (see *Religion*

*and Spirituality*) consume neither pork nor alcohol. In addition, they observe rules of animal slaughter and meat preparation to ensure that food is **halal**, allowed by Islamic law. Hindu Indonesians (see *Religion and Spirituality*) generally avoid beef, preferring chicken, mutton, and seafood. Other Hindus are vegetarians who acquire their protein through beans, soy, and dairy products.

### Popular Dishes and Meals

Indonesians often consume rice porridge with coffee or tea for breakfast. Lunch and dinner usually consist of rice, meat, and vegetables. Women typically prepare food around midday that is consumed for both lunch and dinner.

While each region has its own traditional dishes, popular entrées across the archipelago include **nasi goreng**, fried rice prepared with spices such as galangal, turmeric, and ginger; **nasi campur**, a mound of white rice mixed with meat, seafood, and vegetables; **satay**, grilled and skewered chicken or beef served with peanut sauce; and **bakso**, a meatball soup. Well-known regional dishes include **rendang**, a traditional western Sumatran dish of beef simmered in spices and coconut milk; and **gado-gado**, a Balinese dish of rice, vegetables, peanuts, tofu or

tempeh (fermented soybeans), and bean sprouts topped with peanut sauce.

Fresh fruit and **es**, crushed ice mixed with fruit and jelly, then topped with sweetened condensed milk, are popular snacks and desserts.



## Beverages

Indonesians typically drink water or other beverages after meals rather than during. Popular drinks include sweetened black or ginger tea, coffee, and icy fruit drinks such as avocado blended with sweetened, condensed milk and chocolate sauce. While Muslim Indonesians generally avoid alcohol, it is available in most cities and areas where tourists frequent. Besides locally-brewed Bintang beer, spirits include **tuak** (palm wine), **arak** (rice wine), and Balinese **brem** (rice wine). In recent years, conservative Muslim groups have advocated legislation that would ban alcohol consumption throughout the country.

## Eating Out

Eating out is a popular Indonesian pastime, and dining options vary widely. Of note, tipping is not generally expected, although high-end restaurants may add a 21% charge called “plus plus” that includes tax and a service fee.



**Kaki lima** are street food vendors selling snacks or simple foods such as soup, fried noodles, fruit juices, or ice cream. By contrast, **warungs** are more permanent roadside food stalls that offer simple dining tables. **Padang** restaurants serve traditional foods from the Sumatran city of Padang that are also popular throughout the archipelago.

## Health Overview

The Indonesian population's health has improved significantly over the last decades. Life expectancy increased from 49 years in 1960 to 73 years in 2023, higher than the global average of 72 but lower than the average in neighboring Malaysia (76). Meanwhile, infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) has dropped from 148 per 1,000 live births in 1960 to 19 in 2023, although this rate is still double the rate in Malaysia (6). Further, maternal mortality in Indonesia has fallen from 446 deaths per 100,000 live births to 173, although it remains rather high compared to rates in Malaysia (21) and the US (21).



Generally, healthcare delivery is challenging due to Indonesia's large size and geographic diversity (see *Political and Social Relations*). Medical facilities are concentrated in urban areas, meaning rural residents must travel long distances to obtain services beyond primary care.

## Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of the knowledge, practices, and skills derived from a native population's beliefs, experiences, and theories. Traditional methods remain popular in rural areas where Indonesians typically rely on **dukun** (traditional healers) for medical services. While methods vary widely, common practices include **mantras** (chants), charms, massages, and herbal medicines. Indonesians expect **dukun** to cure a wide range of diseases, from heart disease to cancer among others.

Consumed in liquid, paste, powder, or capsule form, **jamu** is a popular herbal remedy that typically includes turmeric, galangal, ginger, lemongrass, and tamarind. The tonic is used to cure a variety of ailments such as headache, fatigue, fever, infertility, and insomnia. It is sometimes used to treat diseases such as cancer and heart disease. The government has recently begun

a partnership program with **dukun beranak**, traditional birth attendants, to improve midwife services to rural women.

### Modern Healthcare System

In 2014, Indonesia's government established **Jaminan Kesehatan Nasional** (JKN), a national healthcare system that requires citizens to pay a small premium based on income, with the poorest citizens receiving free care. Before the implementation of JKN, the wealthy bought private insurance, while the government provided basic coverage for the poorest Indonesians. Ineligible for government subsidies, middle-income



Indonesians were denied coverage because they lacked the funds to pay out of pocket for health services. JKN aims to close this gap and has provided coverage to 97% of citizens as of the end of 2024. While the

system has attracted new enrollees, who previously had no access to healthcare, it suffers a lack of funding for rising costs.

The government operates various types of medical facilities focusing on public and preventative health services. A key part of this strategy are **puskesmas**, health centers in rural areas that provide basic primary care, administer immunization programs, and offer family planning services. As of 2023, there were 10,180 *puskesmas* throughout the country, although likely more in recent years.

### Health Challenges

Indonesia faces a severe lack of trained medical professionals. In 2024, there were just 47 physicians per 100,000 people, lower than neighboring Malaysia's rate of 231 and significantly lower than the 2024 US rate of 313. Rural areas especially lack trained personnel. Although the government requires medical school graduates to serve in rural areas for a year, it is difficult to retain



medical professionals in remote areas. Besides the lack of personnel, Indonesia also lacks sufficient medical facilities.

As is common in many developing countries, the rate of noncommunicable diseases, such as cardiovascular and chronic respiratory diseases, cancer, and diabetes, has risen, now accounting for some 52% of deaths. Several habits contribute to this increase, including poor diet, lack of exercise, and smoking. In 2023, some 70% of Indonesian men (and 5% of women) smoked cigarettes daily, compared to 13% of American men. Some Indonesians chew betel nuts, which also negatively impact health. Consisting of an areca nut wrapped in betel pepper leaves, betel nuts produce a mild euphoria and stain the chewer's mouth reddish-purple. Chewing betel nuts is linked to higher rates of oral cancers as well as other negative health outcomes.

Communicable diseases are responsible for some 19% of deaths each year. Indonesia has the second-highest Tuberculosis burden worldwide with over 1 million new cases and 1.25 million

deaths each year, while dengue fever outbreaks occur annually. Indonesia is also especially vulnerable to infectious disease outbreaks due to



its climate, biodiversity, and close human interaction with animals. For example, COVID-19 infected 6.8 million Indonesians between 2019-2023, causing 161,916 fatalities.

**HIV/AIDS:** About 540,000 Indonesians, or 0.3% of the population, live with HIV/AIDS. This overall prevalence rate is low, with infections concentrated among drug users and sex workers. Papua's 2 provinces are experiencing a low-level epidemic with a prevalence rate 5 times the national average, primarily due to high levels of infection among sex workers.

## 11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

### Overview

For centuries, most regional inhabitants subsisted as farmers, traders, or fishers. As early as 1000 BC, Indonesians served as guides, traders, and shipbuilders along maritime trade routes between India and China. While some Indonesians remained subsistence farmers or fishers, others grew rich from a growing network of trade routes across the archipelago primarily dominated by Indians, Chinese, and Arabs. Beginning in the 16th century, some Europeans established small trading posts on Indonesian islands. Eventually, the Dutch East India Company took control, developing a vast and powerful trading empire based in Java (see *History and Myth*).

In the early 19th century, the Dutch implemented the so-called Cultivation System (see *History and Myth*), requiring 20% of farmland to be used for export crops, primarily sugarcane and coffee. Some Indonesians suffered forced labor conditions and immense economic hardship.

In the late 19th century, the Dutch introduced the Liberal Policy to facilitate private enterprise in the archipelago (see *History and Myth*). Not only did Dutch firms increase the efficiency and production of sugar, coffee, tobacco, indigo, and tea plantations, they began to extract raw materials for industry, such as tin, oil, and rubber tapped from trees brought from South America. To get these products to market, the Dutch built roads, railways, and ports. Then, the Japanese occupation during World War II (see *History and Myth*) brought severe economic hardships for many Indonesians.

Upon gaining independence in 1949 (see *History and Myth*), Indonesia assumed the Dutch colonial administration's debts,



even while Dutch companies maintained control of major institutions and businesses. Moreover, Indonesia's economy was based almost entirely on commodity exports controlled by large state-owned companies and plantations, small farms, and private companies, notably the British-Dutch oil firm Royal Dutch Shell. In subsequent years, the export of oil and gas became increasingly vital to the Indonesian economy.

In the 1950s, President Sukarno implemented his "Guided Economy" policies that nationalized Dutch companies and created repressive conditions that forced some Dutch and Chinese to leave the country (see *History and Myth*).



Mismanagement and corruption led to financial chaos. Foreign debt skyrocketed as central bank credit accounted for around 1/2 of all government spending.

In 1965, Royal Dutch Shell withdrew from Indonesia, and a year

later the economy crashed. Inflation soared above 1,000% as Indonesians lost substantial wealth. In the ensuing chaos, Major General Suharto took control as President, instituting a "New Order" of political and economic reforms (see *History and Myth*).

Under Suharto, 5 California-educated Indonesian economists known as the "Berkeley Mafia" pursued economic reforms and liberalization with help from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In addition to a balanced budget, the group sought a return to private sector development. By 1968, the new policies and political stability fostered economic growth. Nevertheless, concerns about foreign commercial dominance caused Suharto to increase business regulations and to replace imports with subsidized Indonesian-made products. While GDP growth averaged 8% per year in the 1970s, a sharp drop in oil revenues caused the government to encourage renewed private investment, amplified industrialization, and the export of manufactured goods.

From 1981-96, capital market deregulation and private sector growth led to widespread investor confidence in Indonesia, with the economy growing on average 6% per year. Nevertheless, additional business regulations and corruption scandals involving companies run by Suharto's family caused economic irregularities and popular discontent. In 1997, the Thai currency abruptly collapsed, triggering an Asian economic crisis that hit Indonesia particularly hard. In addition to inflation peaking over 75%, the stock market crashed, banks failed, and millions of people lost their jobs. Indonesia fared worse than every other country in Southeast Asia, with per capita



GDP falling by over 14% in 1998. Subsequent riots, political instability, and discontent with the corruption and economic dominance of the Suharto family's companies caused Suharto to resign (see *History and Myth*).

In the years following the crisis, Indonesia's government sought assistance from the IMF to implement structural reforms. Indonesia transferred some power from the federal to municipal governments and liberalized some areas of the economy while limiting foreign ownership in others. By 2003, the financial sector had stabilized. The government continued to pursue reforms, such as limiting the budget deficit, reducing national debt, and containing inflation. Indonesia sought to entice foreign direct investment (FDI) with incentives such as special economic zones offering reduced taxes and regulations in Batam, Bintan, Karimun, and other less-developed areas.

Indonesia withstood the global financial crisis of 2008-09 well, growing over 3% in 2009, while other economies in Southeast Asia contracted. Since then, Indonesia has reduced inflation, poverty, and unemployment. By 2014, Indonesia's stock market was one of Asia's best performing. The election of President Joko Widodo (see *History and Myth*), who campaigned as an

anti-corruption reformist, increased confidence in Indonesia's economy, which grew on average over 4% per year from 2010-19. The economy contracted by -2% in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic but rebounded by 3.7% in 2021, to 5.05% in 2023 and 5.03% in 2024

Nevertheless, Indonesia faces economic challenges. The rate of Indonesians living below the poverty line remains around 9%. Over 19% of city residents live in slums, while rural poverty is even higher. The public sector does not deliver adequate services, 59% of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, and youth unemployment is high. Moreover, corruption is widespread, laws are not always enforced, and overregulation makes it difficult to conduct business. Despite these and other issues, Indonesia is Southeast Asia's largest economy and remains well-positioned to sustain positive growth, provided the government can implement additional reforms to reduce corruption and increase efficiency.

## Services

Accounting for about 43% of GDP and 49% of employment, the services sector is the largest and fastest-growing segment of Indonesia's economy. Significant services sub-sectors include retail trade, public administration, transportation and storage, finance, communications, and tourism. About 70% of work in the services sector consists of informal employment.



**Tourism:** Indonesia's tourism industry recently recovered from a decline in the early 21st century due to terrorist attacks on Bali (see *Political and Social Relations*) and an avian flu outbreak. In 2024,

Indonesia hosted over 112.6 million tourists, primarily from Malaysia, China, Singapore, and India. While Bali is the destination for about 1/2 of all tourists, Jakarta and the Riau Islands are also popular. In 2023, tourism contributed to over 5% of GDP and 12.09 million jobs. Experts expect the sector to grow

at an average annual rate of almost 5% during the next decade once the effects of the pandemic subside.

## Industry

As the second-largest component of the economy, the industrial sector accounts for about 40% of GDP and 22% of the labor force. Significant sub-sectors include manufacturing; oil, gas, coal, and mineral extraction and processing; and construction.

**Manufacturing:** Accounting for over 19% of GDP, Indonesia's diversified manufacturing sector has considerably aided recent economic growth. Significant sub-sectors include food and beverage processing, electronics, chemicals, paper and paper products, tobacco, pharmaceuticals, textiles, rubber and plastic products, transport equipment, metals, and motor vehicles.

**Oil and Gas:** Indonesia currently has the world's 37th largest oil and 23rd largest natural gas reserves. Indonesia's oil industry is one of the world's oldest, as Dutch colonizers began to drill oil wells in the late 19th century. Although oil exports peaked at 1.7 million barrels per day (b/d) in 1977 and accounted for nearly 80% of export revenue in the early 1980s, declining investment, exploration, and productivity have since caused a drop in both output and exports. Pertamina, the state-owned oil and gas corporation, dominates the industry. In 2023, it amassed \$75.79 billion in revenue and is the only Indonesian firm among the world's 500 largest corporations. Though declining in significance, oil and gas account for about 3% of GDP.

In 2021, Indonesia produced about 842,300 b/d and exported over 92,900 b/d. Due to declining production levels and rising demand, Indonesia is now a net oil importer. In the same year, Indonesia produced over 62.6 billion cubic meters (m<sup>3</sup>) of natural gas, exporting almost 23.9 billion m<sup>3</sup>. Indonesia is Southeast Asia's second- largest natural gas exporter.



**Mining and Coal:** Indonesia is one of the world's top gold and tin producers, and also has significant reserves of nickel, iron, copper, bauxite, granite, silver, and other minerals. Grasberg mine in Papua is a joint venture between Freeport McMoRan (48.8%) and the Indonesian government (51.2%), and is the world's largest gold and second-largest copper mine. While the firm is Indonesia's single largest private employer, it temporarily halted production in early 2017 due to disagreements with the government over recent regulations limiting raw mineral exports.

Indonesia has the world's 11th largest coal reserves and is the fifth-largest coal producer. Coal comprises nearly 15% of total exports, sent primarily to China, India, and Japan. While the mining industry accounts for nearly 12% of GDP, coal production and exports account for about 85% of total mining revenues.

**Construction:** In recent years, Indonesia's construction sector has grown by an annual average of about 3% and accounted for around 10% of GDP in 2024. Construction employs over 10% of



the population and will likely continue to fuel economic and employment growth throughout the next decade.

### **Agriculture**

The agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and

forestry and is the smallest component of the Indonesian economy, accounting for around 13% of GDP and 29% of the labor force.

**Farming and Livestock:** About 30% of Indonesia's land area is dedicated to cultivation. Although most farms are just over 1 acre in size, large plantations cultivating cash crops for export are also common. Irrigated and often terraced **sawah** (wet rice fields) dominate agriculture in Java, Bali, and the highlands of Sumatra. Traditional **ladang** cultivation – the “slash-and-burn” technique of burning forests to use the land for a few years of

cultivation – does not use irrigation and is often the standard practice on other islands with drier and less fertile soil.

Indonesia ranks first in the world in the production of palm oil and cloves, second for natural rubber, third for rice, nutmeg and cocoa, and fourth for coffee. Other major crops include corn, cassava (a starchy tuberous root), sugarcane, peanuts, soybeans, coconuts, tobacco, tea, and tropical spices. Poultry, cows, pigs, goats, and sheep are common livestock varieties.

**Fishing:** In 2019, Indonesia's massive fishing industry consisted of over 600,000 primarily small seafaring vessels that harvested almost 25.32 million tons of tuna, mackerel, shrimp, carp, herring, sardines, grouper, and snapper and over 9 million tons of seaweed. That year, over 7 million Indonesians worked in the fishing industry, primarily as small-scale fishers. While most of the catch is consumed locally, Indonesia exported nearly \$2.04 million of tuna and shrimp to Japan, Europe, China, and the US in 2020. The fishing industry accounts for around 3% of GDP in 2023. To reduce unlawful harvests and overfishing, since 2014 the Indonesian Navy has destroyed hundreds of foreign boats found illegally fishing in Indonesian waters.

**Forestry:** With 1/2 of its territory covered by forests in 2018, Indonesia has a highly-developed forestry industry. The government owns over 87% of forests and has placed over 40% under protection.



Nevertheless, current forestry practices are unsustainable. Legal harvests, slash-and-burn cultivation, and illegal logging have reduced total forest cover from over 65% in 1990 to 50% today. Pulp and paper, plywood, timber,

furniture, and other wood products account for over 3% of GDP. Commercial yields primarily include meranti, keruing, kapur, mersawa, eucalyptus, teak, and acacia.



## Currency

Indonesia's currency is the (Rp or IDR), issued in 7 banknote values (1,000; 2,000; 5,000; 10,000; 20,000; 50,000; 100,000) and 4 coin values (100; 200; 500; 1,000). With fluctuations in exchange rates, \$1 has been worth between Rp13,609-Rp16,376 in recent years. Although some larger businesses accept credit cards, smaller vendors typically accept only cash in small denominations.



## Foreign Trade

Indonesia's exports, totaling \$258.8 billion in 2023, primarily consist of mineral fuels, animal or vegetable fats (particularly palm oil), rubber, machinery, and mechanical appliance parts sold to China (23%), the US (10%), Japan (9%), and India (8%). In the same year, Indonesia imported \$221.8 billion of mineral fuels, nuclear reactors, boilers, electrical equipment, and plastics from China (29%), Singapore (8%), Japan (7%), and the US (5%).

## Foreign Aid

Each year, Indonesia receives billions of dollars in foreign aid.



On average, between 2020-2021. Indonesia's largest donors were Japan (\$1.2 billion), Germany (\$723 million), France (\$262 million), and Australia (\$256 million). In 2023, the US disbursed \$230 million to

Indonesia, primarily for health, economic development, and social services programs, as well as aid to support democracy, human rights, and good governance initiatives.

## 12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

### Overview

While Indonesia has well-developed physical infrastructure in some cities, rural areas and outer islands largely lack modern telecommunications and transport infrastructure. Indonesians generally enjoy free speech, although the government restricts some media freedoms and Internet content.

### Transportation

While the number of Indonesian families using a privately-owned vehicle (POV) is growing, travel by bus, **bemo** (minibus), train, taxi, bicycle, and foot are more common. Auto and cycle rickshaws called **bajaj** and **becak**, and **ojeks** (motorbike taxis) provide popular taxi services. Ride-hailing services such as *Uber* and *Go-jek* are increasingly prevalent in cities. Jakarta has an extensive transport system featuring commuter trains and *Transjakarta*, Southeast Asia's first and the world's longest (130 mi) bus rapid transit system that uses restricted lanes. Motorbikes, bicycles, horse-drawn carts, and foot are common methods of transport in rural areas. Trains in Java and Sumatra, and buses on most islands, are common forms of transport between cities, while ferry and air services connect the islands.



With its strategic location along major Asian maritime trade routes, Indonesia uses its roads, railways, ports, airports, and pipelines to play a significant role in regional trade and transport. Despite significant investments, progress is often slow, and many projects remain incomplete for indefinite periods. In Jakarta, a 2-line above and below-ground metro (MRT) and separate light rail (LRT) systems remain under construction with completion dates repeatedly postponed.

**Roadways:** In 2023, Indonesia had about 341,233 mi of roads, with almost 67% paved. While Java, Sumatra, and Bali have

well-developed networks of highways and toll roads, Papua, Kalimantan, and some outer islands do not. Although roads in urban areas are often in good condition, secondary roads in rural towns and the countryside are typically unpaved, in poor condition, and often impassible during monsoon rains.

**Railways:** Indonesia has about 3,407 mi of operational railways. Railways operate primarily on Java and Madura, with less extensive services on Sumatra. On average in 2022, 1.2 million passengers use commuter trains in the Jakarta region daily. Initial construction of a planned high-speed LRT from Jakarta to Bandung was delayed in 2017 due to land title issues. It began commercial operations in October 2023.



### **Ports and Waterways:**

Indonesia has over 13,400 mi of inland waterways, primarily in Kalimantan, Papua, and Sumatra. The Peln national shipping line provides passenger and freight services across the archipelago and to

Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, and Timor-Leste. Major ports include Tanjung Priok, Banjarmasin, Belawan, Bontang, Panjang, and Tanjung Perak.

**Airways:** Indonesia has 513 airports, 186 with paved runways. Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport served over 50.9 million passengers in 2023, making it the third-busiest airport in the ASEAN community. Ngurah Rai International Airport in Bali served over 10 million passengers that year. While Garuda Indonesia is the national flag carrier, budget airline Lion Air serves nearly twice as many passengers. Both carriers offer services to many domestic and international destinations.

### **Energy**

With its own sources of coal, natural gas, and oil (see *Economics and Resources*), Indonesia has a rich and diversified mix of energy resources. The country generates about 62% of its total electricity from coal, 1% from oil, 18% from natural gas, and 19% from hydroelectric plants and other renewable resources. As one

of the world's largest producers of biofuels, Indonesia plans to increase renewable resources' contribution to energy production to 23% by 2025. Some 100% of Indonesians had access to electricity in 2024.

## Media

While Indonesia's Constitution protects freedom of speech and press, the government has used defamation and blasphemy laws to curb these freedoms (see *History and Myth*). Other issues include media dominance by a few firms and restrictions on journalists in certain regions, notably West Papua. Further, journalists sometimes self-censor publications to serve the government's or powerful media firms' interests.

**Print Media:** The Indonesian press includes hundreds of local and national periodicals published in Bahasa Indonesia, English, and other languages. *Kompas*, *Pos Kota*, *Jawa Pos*, *Suara Pembaruan*, *Republika*, *Media Indonesia*, and *Koran Tempo* are popular national daily newspapers with circulations over 200,000. *The Jakarta Post* and *Jakarta Globe* are national English-language publications.

**Radio and TV:** Indonesia has a wide range of both public and private radio and TV broadcasters, with TV the most popular broadcast media. Satellite, Internet, or cable TV services offer international content in Bahasa Indonesia, English, and other languages.

## Telecommunications

Indonesia has a rapidly developing telecommunications network, with 3 landline and 115 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people in 2023.

**Internet:** Indonesia has one of the world's fastest Internet access growth rates, aided by the rapid proliferation of mobile phones. In 2023, nearly 69% of Indonesians had Internet access, up from 22% in 2015. While Indonesians can visit most websites, the government blocks pornography and gambling sites that it alleges violate public decency.





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