



Australian Government
Refugee Review Tribunal

Country Advice

Indonesia

Indonesia – IDN38178 – Chinese
Indonesians – Communal violence – State
protection
18 February 2011

1. What could an ethnic Chinese Indonesian expect from the Indonesian security and judicial authorities if he sought protection?

Since the widespread violence experienced by Chinese Indonesians in 1998, conditions have improved for Chinese Indonesians both culturally and formally. In the last ten years, the representation of Chinese Indonesians in public office, including running for local and national elections has greatly increased; Chinese Indonesians have been encouraged to apply to join the police force; and Chinese ethno-religious holidays are no longer banned – indeed Chinese New Year is now a national holiday. Most significantly, institutional barriers to acquiring citizenship and its attendant rights have been lifted, although some reports of discrimination by bureaucratic agencies persist.

A significant outstanding issue for the ethnic Chinese community is the lack of accountability for crimes committed against Chinese Indonesians during the 1998 riots. Such crimes include the physical and sexual assault of Chinese Indonesian men and women, and extensive property damage to Chinese Indonesian homes and businesses.

There have been several large scale attacks directed against Chinese Indonesians during the 20th century, including the anti-Chinese pogroms in 1965, following the failed coup; 1974 rioting which targeted Chinese businesses; and anti-Chinese riots which continued under the Suharto government. The most serious of the Suharto era attacks was a 1998 riot which began in Java, but spread to other cities, including Jakarta and Medan.¹ Although triggers for this violence were largely attributed to economic strain and the collapse of the rupiah, a 2008 Minority Rights Group International report noted “strong evidence that they were encouraged by elements of the security forces, perhaps to justify the emergency measures to suppress the growing opposition to Suharto.”²

In the period following the 1998 riots, discrimination against ethnic Chinese continued to be a feature of Indonesian society. Indeed, the Chinese Indonesian human rights advocate, Liem Soei Liong stated in a speech representing the Indonesian human rights NGO, Tapol, in 1999:

¹ Minority Rights Group International 2008, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Indonesia : Chinese*, 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49749d0e2d.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 1

² Minority Rights Group International 2008, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Indonesia : Chinese*, 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49749d0e2d.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 1

[t]he Indonesian government policies on the Chinese is blatantly racist. Chinese calligraphy is banned, Chinese-speaking schools banned, people were 'invited' to change their names into Indonesian names etc.³

This endemic discrimination continued, albeit, without the violence which characterised the late 1990s. As Freedom House reported in 2004:

Ethnic Chinese continue to face some harassment and violence, though far less than in the late 1990s, when violent attacks killed hundreds and destroyed many Chinese-owned shops and churches. **Unlike other Indonesians, ethnic Chinese must show a citizenship card to obtain a passport, credit card, or business license or to enroll a child in school—a requirement that makes them vulnerable to extortion by bureaucrats.** Ethnic Chinese make up less than 3 percent of the nation's population, but are resented by some Indonesians for holding the lion's share of private wealth. A few ethnic Chinese have amassed huge fortunes in business, though most are ordinary traders or merchants.⁴

Scholarly studies published in 2005 and 2006 on the situation of the ethnic Chinese in Indonesia have, similarly, been generally positive about the improving situation (noting the absence of any major outbreaks of systematic violence towards the Chinese since the events of May 1998). Nonetheless, these reports also expressed concerns about the ongoing marginalisation of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese as well as the uncertainties which attend this community's future.⁵

Such uncertainties are reflected in a November 2005 news article which expressed fears of another major racial riot in the capital after many ethnic Chinese received "anonymous text messages threatening them with brutal murders and rapes after the Hari Raya Aidilfitri holidays [which, in 2005 were held in November]⁶". The President had expressed his concern over the messages which had been "sent from unregistered cellular pre-paid numbers and ordered security bodies to investigate". A regulation was also issued "to require owners of pre-paid cellphone cards to register themselves by next April". The messages accused Chinese Indonesians of being robbers, enemies of Muslims, and responsible for driving up fuel prices. Chinese Indonesians were disturbed by the messages, which were similar to flyers and emails which were circulating just before the 1998 riots.⁷

The Canadian Immigration Review Board (IRB) compiled advice on the treatment of ethnic Chinese living in Indonesia in 2006. The report notes that there were about six

³ Soei Liong, L. 1999, 'Report: Impact of the Asian crisis on minorities', speech delivered at *Conference on the Asian Crisis "A Chance for Democracy and Human Rights?"*, Berlin, 26 - 28 March 1999, as reprinted at http://tapol.gn.apc.org/reports/speech_asia.html - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 2

⁴ Freedom House 2004, *Freedom in the World – Indonesia (2004)*, http://www.freedomhouse.org/modules/mod_call_dsp_country-fiw.cfm?year=2004&country=2950 - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 3

⁵ A discussion of this research can be found in, Country Advice IDN30965

⁶ 'Hari Raya Aidilfitri' is the "Malay term for the Muslim festival of Eid ul-Fitr (or Id-ul-Fitr)... It is a Muslim holiday that marks the end of Ramadan / Ramadhan, the Islamic holy month of "Puasa" (fasting). The holiday symbolizes the breaking of the fasting period. It is celebrated starting on the first day of the Islamic month of Shawwal / Syawal." 'Hari Raya Puasa Holiday 2010' undated, *sgholiday.com*, <http://sgholiday.com/2009/06/singapore-hari-raya-aidilfitri-holiday-in-calendar-year-2010/#> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 4

⁷ Asmarani, Devi 2005, 'Chinese Indonesians get hate text messages', *Straits Times*, 3 November – Attachment 5 as discussed in *Country Advice IDN17690*

million ethnic Chinese living in Indonesia in 2005 (comprising about two per cent of the total population) although estimates vary.⁸ Country Advice IDN30965 (November 2006) provides a discussion of anecdotal evidence of intolerance towards ethnic Chinese in Indonesia in the Indonesian press.⁹

Drawing on information provided in *The Encyclopedia of Diasporas*, the IRB noted that “[s]ince the end of the repressive Soeharto regime [in 1998], aside from localized incidents, the ethnic Chinese have been left more or less alone.” An interview with a then fellow in Southeast Asian studies at Monash University provided analysis which stated, “the situation of ethnic Chinese, though much improved, remains legally and socially vulnerable”.¹⁰

In spite of this ongoing vulnerability, some progress was made toward alleviating institutional and social discrimination. As the 2008 Minority Rights Group International mentioned earlier notes,

[s]ince 1998 violence and tensions have subsided, and the government of Indonesia has abolished many of the laws which previously restricted the use of Chinese languages and other discriminatory laws ... [including the] cancellation in 2005 of the Indonesian Citizenship Certificate (SBKRI) decree, under which ethnic Chinese were given a special code in their ID which identified them as Chinese and gave the bureaucracy the opportunity to discriminate against them.¹¹

The report further notes that political parties at that time began to claim to represent ethnic Chinese, and ethnic Chinese became “more visibly active in national politics”¹²; senior officials “openly proclaimed their Chinese ancestry”; and public signs in Chinese and Chinese language newspapers were no longer banned. Confucianism became a recognised formal religion (as were Confucian marriages), and the Chinese New Year officially became a national holiday.¹³

⁸ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2006, *Indonesia: Reports of attacks against ethnic Chinese, Christians and non-Christians alike; state protection available (2004 – 2006)*, 28 March, IDN101030.E <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/45f147482f.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 6

⁹ Country Advice IDN30965. See also: ‘Indonesian president calls for end to discrimination against ethnic Chinese’ 2006, *BBC Monitoring Asia Pacific*, source: Xinhua news agency, 5 February – Attachment 7 ; For anecdotal reports of discrimination, see: Hadipuro, Wijanto 2006, ‘Being a Chinese-Indonesian’, *Jakarta Post*, 13 June, Minorités website <http://www.minorities.org/article.php?IDA=16590> – Accessed 3 October 2006 – Attachment 8 ; and Taufiqurrahman, M. 2006, ‘A Chinese-Indonesian history of discrimination’, *The Jakarta Post*, 26 May – Attachment 9 ; for more on religion and the identity card, see US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report 2006 – Indonesia*, 15 September, Section I & III – Attachment 10

¹⁰ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, *Indonesia: Reports of attacks against ethnic Chinese, Christians and non-Christians alike; state protection available (2004 - 2006)*, 28 March 2006, IDN101030.E , <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/45f147482f.html>

¹¹ Minority Rights Group International 2008, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Indonesia: Chinese*, 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49749d0e2d.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 1; for further information on the religious practice and experience in Indonesia, see for example, United States Department of State, *2010 Report on International Religious Freedom - Indonesia*, 17 November 2010, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4cf2d09264.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 10

¹² Minority Rights Group International 2008, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Indonesia: Chinese*, 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49749d0e2d.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 1. For further information on the religious practice and experience in Indonesia, see for example, US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report 2006 – Indonesia*, 15 September, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4cf2d09264.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 10

¹³ Minority Rights Group International 2008, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Indonesia: Chinese*, 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49749d0e2d.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011,

Indicative of the complex situation for ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, a *Jakarta Globe* article in the lead up to the 2009 elections, interviewed Chinese Indonesian candidates, including Priscillia Suntoso:

Priscillia Suntoso, legislative candidate from the Democratic Party, claimed gender had never been an obstacle for her on the campaign trail, unlike the issue of ethnicity and religion. “I never encountered any problems or discrimination because I’m a woman. **I do, however, face discrimination because I’m of Chinese descent and a Catholic,**” said Priscillia, an immigration lawyer who represents Pangkal Pinang in Bangka and Belitung province.¹⁴

Similarly, the *Jakarta Post* reported in 2009, the views of two recently elected ethnic Chinese legislative representatives, who have “pledged to fight for the rights of the country’s minority groups.”¹⁵

Democratic Party legislative candidate Eddy Sadeli said he was keen to focus on supervising public services because many Chinese-Indonesians still faced discrimination when dealing with the bureaucracy. “It is no secret that Chinese-Indonesian people, especially those living in big cities, are treated like cash-cows in government offices,” Eddy said.¹⁶

A February 2007 news article published in the English language Chinese news website *People.com.cn* reported that ethnic Chinese were invited to become police officers in East Kalimantan (where ethnic Chinese make up approximately 13 per cent of the population¹⁷). Representation of ethnic minorities within security forces is often indicative of a more inclusive attitude within the police, at least publically, although statistics on the current percentage of ethnic Chinese within the police force were not found in the sources consulted. The article states:

East Kalimantan Police of Indonesia invite ethnic Chinese to take part in a selection for candidates of police officers, Antara News Agency reports on Saturday. **Provincial police chief Ins. Gen. Indarto said Saturday that all Indonesians, including ethnic Chinese, have equal rights to become police officers.** “We have ethnic Chinese dentist in East Kalimantan Police headquarters ... But so far there are no ethnic Chinese, who apply to become police officers in the first round of the selection,” Indarto was quoted by Antara as saying. **During the rule of former Indonesian president Soeharto, there was little access for ethnic Chinese to become civil servants or other relevant positions in government institutions.** Therefore, most of Chinese Indonesians become traders

Attachment 1. For further information on the religious practice and experience in Indonesia, see for example, US Department of State 2006, *International Religious Freedom Report 2006 – Indonesia*, 15 September, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4cf2d09264.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 10

¹⁴ Diani, H. 2009, ‘The Big Issue: Female Candidates Face Rocky Road to Election’, *The Jakarta Globe*, 24 March, <http://tapol.gn.apc.org/elections/digest11.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011, Attachment 11

¹⁵ ‘New Promises for RI’s Ethnic Chinese’ 2009, *The Jakarta Post*, 20 May

<http://tapol.gn.apc.org/elections/digest16.html#L15> - Accessed 17 February 2011, Attachment 12

¹⁶ ‘New Promises for RI’s Ethnic Chinese’ 2009, *The Jakarta Post*, 20 May

<http://tapol.gn.apc.org/elections/digest16.html#L15> - Accessed 17 February 2011, Attachment 12

¹⁷ Australian Migration Review and Refugee Review Tribunals, Country Advice 2005, *Indonesia – Ethnic Chinese – May 1998 Riots – Sexual Harassment – Sexual Abuse IDN17675*

and other businesses for their living. Around 5 percent of some 220 million Indonesians are ethnic Chinese.¹⁸

Attachments

1. Minority Rights Group International 2008, *World of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Indonesia: Chinese*, 2008, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/49749d0e2d.html> - Accessed 18 February 2011.
2. Soei Liong, L. 1999, 'Report: Impact of the Asian crisis on minorities', speech delivered at *Conference on the Asian Crisis "A Chance for Democracy and Human Rights?"*, Berlin, 26 - 28 March 1999, as reprinted at http://tapol.gn.apc.org/reports/speech_asia.html - Accessed 18 February 2011.
3. Freedom House 2004, *Freedom in the World – Indonesia (2004)*, http://www.freedomhouse.org/modules/mod_call_dsp_country-fiw.cfm?year=2004&country=2950 - Accessed 18 February 2011.
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¹⁸ Li, L. (ed.) 2007, 'Ethnic Chinese invited to become police officers in Indonesia', 17 February, [www.chinaview.cn](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-02/17/content_5751152.htm), http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-02/17/content_5751152.htm - Accessed 21 February 2011, Attachment 14

12. 'New Promises for RI's Ethnic Chinese' 2009, *The Jakarta Post*, 20 May
<http://tapol.gn.apc.org/elections/digest16.html#L15> – Accessed 17 February 2011.
13. Australian Migration Review and Refugee Review Tribunals, *Country Advice IDN17675* 2005, *Indonesia*.
14. Li, L. (ed.) 2007, 'Ethnic Chinese invited to become police officers in Indonesia', 17 February, www.chinaview.cn, - Accessed 21 February 2011.