Country Advice
Indonesia – IDN36185 – Surabaya – Christians – Muslims – Communal conflict – Religious groups
12 February 2010

1 Please advise whether there is conflict between Muslims and Christians in Surabaya?

Recent Violent Conflict

Despite recent warnings and threats made against members of the Christian community, there have been no reports of attacks on Christian churches, schools or homes in Surabaya since the well publicised events of the 1990s. Tensions and conflict between some Islamic groups and Christians elsewhere in Indonesia is substantial and well publicised. 2009 saw a continuation of churches attacked, and sometimes destroyed, by mobs. In Surabaya the only significant incident of inter-religious conflict in recent years was in January 2009 when a group of Muslims tried to enter Indonesia’s last remaining synagogue, apparently in protest against Israel’s operations in Gaza. According to the US Department of State, “[s]ome protesters carried signs with anti-Semitic references. Police forced back the protesters, who tried to enter the synagogue. There were no injuries or damage.” According to The Jakarta Post, the synagogue has since reported that the synagogue has now closed.2

The most significant attacks on Christians in Surabaya occurred in July 1996. According to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, during these events “several Christian churches were burned in Surabaya.” In October of the same year “24 churches and a Buddhist temple on the East Java coast” were also destroyed by rioters, reportedly in protest at “the leniency of a sentence given to a Muslim by an Indonesian judge for slandering Islam.” A Christian minister, his wife, child and a church worker were killed in the ensuing violence.3

For a comprehensive list of the churches attacked or destroyed in Indonesia between 1996 and 2005 see ‘Perbandingan pertambahan Islam dan Kristen’. This list includes a number of churches in Surabaya; however, the last such event was in April 1997, when stones were thrown at a Catholic Church.4

According to The Catholic News, many of Indonesia’s Islamic leaders condemned and apologised for the violence of 1996, including Abdurrahman Wahid, then head of Nahdlatul

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1 US Department of State 2009, International Religious Freedom Report – Indonesia, 26 October, Section III – Attachment 1
3 Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 1999, IDN30781.E Indonesia: Treatment of Christians, 1 January – Attachment 3
4 Lawalata, M. 2005, ‘Perbandingan pertambahan Islam dan Kristen’, Islamkristen website, 1 November
http://www.mail-archive.com/islamkristen@yahoogroups.com/msg21696.html – Accessed 10 February 2010 – Attachment 4
Ulama and later president of Indonesia. *The Catholic News* adds that Abdurrahman Wahid may have suspected that the perpetrators were actually members of his own organisation.\(^5\)

Since the events of 1996 there have only been a small number of incidents in Surabaya attributed to anti-Christian activity aside from the aforementioned stoning. In August 2001 a bomb killed one woman in a Christian neighbourhood. Also in 2001 a church was destroyed and two others vandalised in attacks in Pasaruan, 80 kilometres east of Surabaya.\(^6\) In 2004 it was reported that a Surabaya Catholic school run by the Sisters of Saint Ursula received bomb threats.\(^7\) In 2007 forty one Christians were sentenced to up to five years in prison for blasphemy in a Surabaya court; according to *BosNewsLife*, these Christians were reportedly captured on film openly praying that Muslims “come to know Christ”.\(^8\) For more information on incidents elsewhere in East Java see RRT Research & Information 2008, *Research Response IND33066*.\(^9\)

Tensions between religious groups in Surabaya and East Java appear relatively minor compared to situations elsewhere in Indonesia, particularly in West Java. According to a 2008 article in *Compass Direct News*, 110 churches closed across Indonesia in the three years prior. According to the author, Islamic groups responsible for attacks and closures include “the Islamic Defender Front (Front Pembela Islam, or FPI), the Indonesian Mujahidin Council, Hizbullah Front, Muslim Clergy Members Forum (Forum Ulama Umat Islam) and the Muslim Safety Forum (Dewan Keamanan Masjid).” In the first four years of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s presidency there were 87 reported cases of closed or destroyed churches.\(^10\)

**State Protection**

While much of the most recent conflict has occurred in West Java and Medan, Sumatra, Indonesian authorities have been actively providing state protection to many Christian communities across Indonesia, particularly during Christmas celebrations.\(^11\) *The Jakarta Globe* reported that no violent incidents were recorded over Christmas 2009 due to the deployment of security forces at churches across Indonesia. The report does not comment on the level of security required or deployed in Surabaya; however, it does carry an accompanying photo of a large Christmas gathering at the Bethani church in the city, attended by “thousands” of people.\(^12\) In 2008 *The Jakarta Post* reported that in Surabaya some four

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\(^6\) *East Java hit by fresh violence’ 2001, The Jakarta Post, 30 May – Attachment 6


A thousand provincial police were deployed in the city for Christmas and New Year celebrations.\(^{13}\)

**Radical Islam in Surabaya**

Radical Islamic groups preaching violent jihad against the West and Christian organisations do have a presence in East Java and Surabaya. A 2007 report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) on Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) states that there is a significant chapter of JI in both Surabaya and East Java as a whole. According to the ICG, the East Java wakalah, or subdivision of JI, is said to be the third largest in Indonesia. The report also states that Cholily, who they describe as “an East Java JI member arrested for helping prepare the Bali II bombs”, reported that approximately 100 members attended a meeting of the East Java wakalah in Surabaya in 2000, “meaning total membership was certainly larger.” In 2005 the East Java wakalah was large enough to be further subdivided into six qirdas (cells). In Surabaya JI activities have reportedly been based at the Darussalam Institute since at least 1997; however, several other Surabaya mosques, “notably al-Ikhsan, also hosted regular JI pengajians, suggesting the presence of more than one cell.”\(^{14}\)

The majority of Indonesia’s Muslim population is well known for its moderate interpretation of Islam. Citizens of Surabaya have also demonstrated that they subscribe to religious tolerance. In June 2009 it was reported that residents of a Surabaya neighbourhood, Jalan Sidotopo IV, took action against a local mosque that they believe promoted ‘hard-line’ Islamic teachings. It was reported in *The Jakarta Globe* that “[r]esidents of Jalan Sidotopo IV in the city shut down the Al Ihsan Sabiliillah Mosque for three full days before agreeing to re-open it. The dispute came to an end only after a meeting with the head of the mosque and local authorities at the Sukolilo subdistrict office.”\(^{15}\)

**Chinese Christians in Surabaya**

Many Christian communities in Java, Surabaya included, are also often of ethnic Chinese origin and therefore at least some attacks in the past have actually been ethnically based, something Christian community leaders have also acknowledged. In a 2001 article on Surabaya’s Jewish community, Hery Setyo Adi, secretary of the Surabaya Christian Community Forum stated that “[m]obs who burn churches are jealous of the Chinese Christians or have a grudge against the government so it’s not purely a religious clash.”\(^{16}\)

Like elsewhere in Southeast Asia, Indonesia’s Chinese form a disproportionate percentage of the entrepreneurial middle classes. Economic crises, such as occurred in Indonesia in 1997/1998, can precipitate violence against wealthy communities. For more information on the events of 1998 see RRT Research & Information 2007, *Research Response IND31735*. Question 4 of that response examines in detail the attacks on the Chinese community in Surabaya in 1998. Question 3 of the same response examines the situation of Christians in general in Indonesia, with some focus on Catholics and the situation in Central Java.\(^{17}\)

\(^{14}\) International Crisis Group 2007, *Indonesia: Jemaah Islamiyah’s Current Status*, Asia Briefing N°63, 3 May, p.8 – Attachment 14  
\(^{17}\) RRT Research & Information 2007, *Research Response IND31735*, 15 May – Attachment 17
Questions 5 and 6 of a 2008 RRT Research Response also provide information on the treatment of Christians in Indonesia, and whether state protection is available for victims of religious violence and whether the state sponsors discrimination against or maltreatment of Christians.\textsuperscript{18}

2 What are the percentages of the major religious groups in Surabaya?

Numerous sources indicate that Surabaya’s population practices a diverse range of religions, including Islam (Sunni, Shia and Ahmadiyya), Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, as well as a small and actively practising Jewish community. Statistics Indonesia (Badan Pusat Statistik http://www.bps.go.id/) collects data on the size of various religious denominations; however, they have not published statistics specifically on the city of Surabaya. According to 2004 figures listed on the website of the Hierarchy of the Catholic Church, Surabaya has a Catholic population 150,457, or 4.4% of the official population base of 3,400,000.\textsuperscript{19} According to the World Council of Churches, Christians “constitute 1.5 million (including Roman Catholic) of the 34 million population of East Java”, in which Surabaya is located, with Muslims constituting some 95.5 percent of the population.\textsuperscript{20} This proportion of Muslims in the province is higher than the national average, which according to the US Department of State is 88 percent. Christians represent nine percent of the national total, with twice as many Protestants as Catholics.\textsuperscript{21}

Source Consulted

**Government**

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade www.dfat.gov.au
Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/
UK Home Office http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/
US Department of State http://www.state.gov/

**Non-Government Organisations**

Human Rights Watch www.hrw.org
Amnesty International www.amnesty.org
International Crisis Group www.icg.org
Freedom House http://www.freedomhouse.org/

**Asian/Indonesian News**

Asia Times http://www.atimes.com
The Jakarta Globe http://thejakartaglobe.com
Top News http://www.topnews.in
The Jakarta Post http://www.thejakartapost.com/
Tempo http://www.tempointeractive.com/
Kompas http://english.kompas.com/

**International News**

\textsuperscript{18} RRT Research & Information 2008, Research Response IDN34011, 4 December – Attachment 18
\textsuperscript{20} ‘East Java Christian Church’ 2006, World Council of Churches, 1 January
\textsuperscript{21} US Department of State 2009, International Religious Freedom Report – Indonesia, 26 October – Attachment 1
List of Attachments


18. RRT Research & Information 2008, Research Response IDN34011, 4 December.
