



**Australian Government**  
**Refugee Review Tribunal**

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# Country Advice

## Indonesia

Indonesia – IDN37106 – Central Java –  
Chinese Christians – Communal violence –  
Church closures – State protection – Taxes

25 August 2010

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**1. Please provide an update on the situation in Central Java in relation to Chinese Christians.**

Violence encountered by Chinese Christians in Central Java is mainly a result of religious conflicts involving church closings. Church closings occur when Christians attempt to build or expand churches in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods and non-Christians take legal action, or more forceful measures, to stop construction. While ethnic Chinese endure some discrimination across Indonesia, most sources indicate that many reports of problems encountered by ethnic Chinese are mainly over their religious affiliation and the locations of their house of worship. Sources also indicate that anti-Chinese Christian incidents are much less of a problem in Central Java than in neighbouring West Java, where the majority of church closing incidents were reported to be located. Though sporadic violence and clashes do occur over church locations, no recent reports were located indicating that physical attacks on individuals were occurring on any regular basis.

The most recent US Department of State<sup>1</sup> (DOS) report states that Protestants in Indonesia number 19 million and are commonly referred to as Christians, stating:

The Ministry of Religious Affairs estimates that 19 million Protestants (referred to locally as Christians) and 8 million Catholics live in the country. The province of East Nusa Tenggara has the highest proportion of Catholics at 55 percent. The province of Papua contains the highest proportion of Protestants at 58 percent. Other areas, such as the Maluku Islands and North Sulawesi, host sizable Christian communities.

Recent anti-Christian incidents listed in the 2010 DOS report consist mainly of church closings, most of them forced by community actions in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods. While the report mentions violence and intimidation tactics, there were no reports of significant violence against Christian individuals for any other particular cause. There were no reports of violence or harm directed specifically at Chinese Christians. The DOS summarised anti-Christian incidents in the report as follows:

During the reporting period, some Christian and Hindu groups pointed to sporadic acts of discrimination in which local authorities refused to authorize the building of churches and temples even though the groups managed to collect the necessary signatures.

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009 – Indonesia*, 26 October - Attachment 1.

According to confirmed reports, extremist groups used violence and intimidation to close at least nine churches during the reporting period. Groups also delayed and in some cases blocked petitions for churches to complete renovations. Small churches in West Java were under the most pressure, including in areas of Bandung, Tangerang, and Bekasi. At least six of the nine churches known to have closed did so due to pressure from local officials, while the remaining three churches closed due to pressure from the local community. While often present, police rarely acted to prevent forced church closings and in previous reporting periods had sometimes assisted in the closure.

At present, the threat to Christians in general appears to be low in Central Java, based on the number of incidents, when compared to other areas of Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> The website Compass Direct,<sup>3</sup> which reports on persecution of Christians worldwide, maintains a list of anti-Christian incidents in 2009-2010. A review of this list indicates that the majority of closings occurred in West Java. On 24 July, an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*<sup>4</sup> confirmed this assessment, pointing to West Java as a major conflict region where militant Islamic groups attempt to stop Christian church construction. Virtually all of the incidents described by Compass Direct were community actions to stop construction of new churches. Significantly, most of the incidents involved the administrative revocation of permits or court challenges to building permits rather than violent acts.<sup>5</sup>

Freedom House<sup>6</sup> reports in their 2010 *Annual Report* that in Indonesia concerns over religious intolerance continue and recent government policies have failed to put a stop to all violent incidents. It is noteworthy that strife among Islamic sects figures much more prominently than anti-Christian problems in a discussion of intolerance and violence in Indonesia. Freedom House comments that Indonesia is one of the most ethnically diverse countries in the world and that discriminatory practices do exist. In the report, ethnic Chinese grievances are not among the current problem areas highlighted, though it is acknowledged that this was a problem for this segment of the population in the past.

According to DOS, anti-Christian incidents in 2009 also mainly consisted of church closing. Some churches were operating in homes and storefronts and had to relocate to continue services. There was no reference to Chinese Christians being singled out for specific attack or harm. The report states:

According to the Indonesian Communion of Churches and the Wahid Institute, local government officials and local communities forced the closing of at least nine licensed and unlicensed churches across the country during the reporting period. Many of the targeted churches operated in private homes and storefronts, and some

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<sup>2</sup> Allard, T 2010, 'Islamic hardliners target Indonesian Christians' *Sydney Morning Herald* 24 July <http://www.smh.com.au/world/islamic-hardliners-target-indonesian-christians-20100723-10oqi.html?skin=text-only> - Accessed 20 August 2010 – Attachment 2.

<sup>3</sup> 'News by Country Search Results: Indonesia' 2010, Compass Direct website <http://www.compassdirect.org/?view=Search+results&query=indonesia&page=1> - Accessed 20 August 2010 – Attachment 3.

<sup>4</sup> Allard, T. 2010, 'Islamic hardliners target Indonesian Christians' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July <http://www.smh.com.au/world/islamic-hardliners-target-indonesian-christians-20100723-10oqi.html?skin=text-only> - Accessed 24 August 2010 – Attachment 2.

<sup>5</sup> 'News by Country Search Results: Indonesia' 2010, Compass Direct website <http://www.compassdirect.org/?view=Search+results&query=indonesia&page=1> - Accessed 20 August 2010 – Attachment 3

<sup>6</sup> 'Countries at the Crossroads 2010 Country Report - Indonesia' 2010, Freedom House, Section 3.58 <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=9&ccrpage=43&ccrcountry=188> - Accessed 25 August 2010 – Attachment 4.

churches moved their services to rented spaces in public shopping malls to avoid threats from hardline groups.

In 2009 Jemma Purdey, researcher in the Centre of Southeast Asian Studies at Monash University and a member of the Inside Indonesia board, reported that anti-Chinese violence and attacks on churches were severe in the 1990s; however, by 2009 she characterised the situation as one of ‘concern’, a much different assessment. She also points out that a more general concern with religious freedoms has replaced specific anti-Chinese Christian problems. Purdey’s assessment is similar to the government and non-government organisation sources above, referencing the specific problem of forced church closings, but also raising broader religious freedom issues which go beyond simply Muslim versus Christian conflicts. She states:

During the late 1990s attacks on places of worship with largely Chinese congregations escalated in terms of frequency and the levels of violence used. The trigger for much of this violence was the ‘legality’ of the ‘church’. Complaints about extensions being added to buildings without appropriate official permission and excessive noise and traffic in the area on weekends were common. Attacks on what were churches with predominantly ethnic Chinese congregations, such as in Situbondo in mid-1996 and in Holis, a Bandung suburb, in October 1999 also involved attacks on ‘Chinese’ property aside from their place of worship.

Though attacks on churches in recent years have not spread in the same way to other ‘Chinese’ targets, their increased frequency in conjunction with the attacks on religious freedoms is a cause for concern for ethnic Chinese Christians and their co-religionists.<sup>7</sup>

Most sources agree that new church construction and existing church expansions are the source of most conflicts facing ethnic Chinese Christians today and they account for virtually all reported incidents of violence. The Indonesian government in 2007 sought to address this problem by establishing a mechanism to erect new churches with community approval. Jemma Purdey describes the government regulations and mixed record of success:

...the Minister for Religion and Minister for Home Affairs issued a joint decree that intended to clarify the rules and regulations governing the establishment of places of worship. Under this decree, congregations wishing to establish a place of worship are required to have at least 90 members, show that they have the support of 60 locals, and must acquire municipal permits and clearance from a newly established Community Forum for Religious Harmony. In the mid to long term the new regulations may improve the process for establishing new churches, mosques and temples. But the implications are less clear for buildings that are already being used for worship. Many minority groups operating places of worship in hostile Muslim neighborhoods find themselves in legal limbo and without protection as local communities are resorting to extra-legal methods of protest.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Purdey, J. 2009, ‘A common destiny. Challenges remain for Chinese Indonesians 10 years after reformasi’, *Inside Indonesia*, March <http://www.insideindonesia.org/index.php/component/content/1168?task=view> - Accessed 5 May 2010 – Attachment 5.

<sup>8</sup> Purdey, J. 2009, ‘A common destiny. Challenges remain for Chinese Indonesians 10 years after reformasi’, *Inside Indonesia*, March <http://www.insideindonesia.org/index.php/component/content/1168?task=view> - Accessed 5 May 2010 – Attachment 5.

Discrimination against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia, in more general terms, also remains a problem. On 2 May 2010, South China Morning Post reported on the situation for Chinese Indonesians. The report states that harassment “remains a continual problem at the local level despite the repeal of discriminatory national laws against Chinese-Indonesians more than a decade ago”. Freedom House’s 2010 annual report on Indonesia stated that ethnic Chinese face discrimination in Indonesia, reporting that: ‘Ethnic Chinese, who make up less than 3 percent of the population but are resented for reputedly holding the lion’s share of the country’s wealth, continue to face harassment and occasional violence.’<sup>9</sup> No other references to physical violence based on racial discrimination were located.

## **2. Are there any reports of Chinese Christians having to pay more tax than other groups in Indonesia?**

No information was found indicating that Chinese Christians have to pay more tax than other religious groups in Indonesia. Graft and corruption are a problem throughout Indonesian society. Freedom House’s 2010 Annual Report stated that ‘corruption remains endemic in Indonesia’ and noted that ‘predatory tax collection, especially at the sub-national level, poses a significant problem’<sup>10</sup> Any unscrupulous tax schemes would most likely affect all religious groups equally and the report did not list religious groups among the significant sectors discussed. The only information located specifically referencing unfair taxes and religion was regarding corruption associated with Muslims paying for a government administered program sending pilgrims to the Hajj and government officials being investigated for corrupt management of the fees collected.<sup>11</sup>

## **3. After the riots in 1998, have the authorities been able to offer adequate protection?**

Authorities are much better able to protect ethnic Chinese from violence and harm since the nationwide riots of May 1998, when Indonesians directed their desperation and anger over a severe financial crisis first at ethnic Chinese businesses and then all ethnic Chinese. For a review of the events of 1998, which resulted in hundreds of Chinese killed and injured, businesses destroyed, and the reported rapes of dozens of Chinese women, see RRT Research Response IDN30246<sup>12</sup>. Government initiatives implemented in the aftermath of the violence, consisted of societal and legal reforms including ending the President Suharto-era ban on the display and broadcast of Chinese languages, legalising Chinese New Year and declaring it a national holiday<sup>13</sup>, passing several anti-discrimination laws,<sup>14</sup> and introducing a new non-discriminatory citizenship law in 2006 which directly

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<sup>9</sup> Freedom House 2010, *Freedom in the World – Indonesia*

<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7841> - Accessed 5 May 2010 – Attachment 6.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Countries at the Crossroads 2010 Country Report - Indonesia’ 2010, Freedom House, Section 2.90 <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=9&ccrpage=43&ccrcountry=188> - Accessed 25 August 2010 – Attachment 4.

<sup>11</sup> Onishi, N. 2010, ‘In Indonesia, Many Eyes Follow Money for Hajj’, *New York Times*, 5 August <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/06/world/asia/06hajj.html> - Accessed 25 August 2010 – Attachment 7.

<sup>12</sup> RRT Country Advice Service 2010, *Research Response IDN30246*, 26 June – Attachment 8.

<sup>13</sup> Purdey, J. 2009, ‘A common destiny. Challenges remain for Chinese Indonesians 10 years after reformasi’, *Inside Indonesia*, March <http://www.insideindonesia.org/index.php/component/content/1168?task=view> - Accessed 5 May 2010 – Attachment 5.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Bill against racial discrimination passed’ 2008, *The Jakarta Post*, 29 October <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/10/29/bill-against-racial-discrimination-passed.html> – Accessed 3 November 2008 – Attachment 9.

benefited immigrant minorities. A 2009 article in *Inside Indonesia*<sup>15</sup> argues that with these reforms, the treatment of Indonesia's ethnic Chinese minority has been tied "to the fate of their fellow Indonesians". The article characterises the extent to which the situation for the ethnic Chinese minority improved legally and politically in the wake of these changes as 'remarkable'.

The above reforms appear to have rapidly improved the situation of ethnic Chinese and Chinese Christians from the outset. A 2006 Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada report addressing attacks on ethnic Chinese and Christians in Indonesia reported there was a complete absence of attacks between 2004 and 2006. The report acknowledged that ethnic Chinese remained vulnerable to discrimination tactics, though their situation was 'much improved'. While these legislative actions had the intended effect of greatly reducing violent attacks, there is still room for improvement. The US Department of State reported in March 2010 that despite reform, some ethnic Chinese reported that "public servants still discriminated against them when issuing marriage licenses and in other services and often demanded bribes for a citizenship certificate, although such certificates were no longer legally required." Furthermore, a number of other, unspecified discriminatory statutes remain yet to be eliminated.<sup>16</sup>

Efforts at further positive reform for ethnic Chinese continue. A February 2009 article in *The Jakarta Post* reports that President Yudhoyono has "called on all state officials to improve their services to the country's Confucian and Chinese-Indonesian communities, saying all discriminatory acts against minorities must be put to an end."<sup>17</sup> In 2008 the Indonesian Assembly further bolstered anti-discrimination laws by passing legislation setting a minimum jail term for discriminatory acts.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these macro-level institutional reforms, the record for police abilities to protect ethnic Chinese Christians is mixed. Sources indicate that the Indonesian police are not always able and/or willing to protect citizens from religious attacks. Circumstances have improved markedly since the riots of 1998, when police were unable or unwilling to protect Chinese citizens from mob violence on a large-scale, and when there were reports of police even contributing to the violence. In the last two years, reports of good police response are approximately equal to critical reports. Most incidents involving ethnic Chinese and police actions do not involve significant violence or property damage. In some cases it is clear that the police were unwilling to stand up to community movements to close religious sites, and in others they may be choosing a less confrontational approach in order to defuse situations.

Indicative of the mixed record of police response and protection, the 2010 DOS report lists examples of poor police protection with more positive reports. The incidents below all involve police response to religious incidents. The Christian ones may have involved ethnic Chinese, but it is not clear from the reports. The report states:

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<sup>15</sup> Purdey, J. 2009, 'A common destiny. Challenges remain for Chinese Indonesians 10 years after reformasi', *Inside Indonesia*, March <http://www.insideindonesia.org/index.php/component/content/1168?task=view> - Accessed 5 May 2010 – Attachment 5.

<sup>16</sup> US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Indonesia*, 11 March – Attachment 10.

<sup>17</sup> 'Chinese Indonesians recognize improvement' 2009, *The Jakarta Post*, 2 February – Attachment 11.

<sup>18</sup> 'Bill against racial discrimination passed' 2008, *The Jakarta Post*, 29 October <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/10/29/bill-against-racial-discrimination-passed.html> – Accessed 3 November 2008 – Attachment 9.

According to confirmed reports, extremist groups used violence and intimidation to close at least nine churches during the reporting period. Groups also delayed and in some cases blocked petitions for churches to complete renovations. Small churches in West Java were under the most pressure, including in areas of Bandung, Tangerang, and Bekasi. At least six of the nine churches known to have closed did so due to pressure from local officials, while the remaining three churches closed due to pressure from the local community. **While often present, police rarely acted to prevent forced church closings and in previous reporting periods had sometimes assisted in the closure.**

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In August 2008 the Pentecostal Church in Indonesia at Pondok Rangon, East Jakarta, was forced to stop services by local residents who vandalized the church. The protesters demanded the church close because it did not have a permit. **Police were quickly at the scene to prevent further damage but did not make any arrests.** Afraid to resume, the church stopped holding services.

...

In July 2008 the Arastamar Evangelical School of Theology (SETIA) was attacked by residents in Kampung Pulo, West Jakarta, after a student was accused of stealing from a resident's home. During the attack more than 20 students were injured. In response to the violence, local authorities immediately relocated more than 1,200 SETIA students who were boarding at the school. The school is currently operating out of three separate locations...**Local police in Kampung Pulo say this is because they cannot protect the students or school administrators from further violence.** The school is currently looking for a new campus.

...

On January 7, 2009, 100 Muslims demonstrated in front of a synagogue in Surabaya protesting the Israeli attacks in Gaza. Some protesters carried signs with anti-Semitic references. **Police forced back the protesters, who tried to enter the synagogue.** There were no injuries or damage.

In a recent indication of police efforts to improve protection for ethnic Chinese, on 14 April 2010, Jakarta Globe reported that the first Chinese Indonesian has graduated from the Indonesian Police Academy. The report states that “an ethnic Chinese working as a public official, let alone a policeman, is a rarity in this country”.<sup>19</sup>

Christmas time has traditionally been a period of increased anti-Christian incidents in Indonesia and it can serve as a barometer of violence levels and government protection abilities. In an indication of recent effective police actions, a *Jakarta Post*<sup>20</sup>, article reported that there were no violent incidents during religious celebrations in December 2009. The article credits authorities with providing an adequate level of security.

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<sup>19</sup> Dante, D. 2010, ‘Officer Happy Makes History for Chinese Indonesians’, *Jakarta Globe*, 14 April <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/culture/officer-happy-makes-history-for-chinese-indonesians/369442-> Accessed 5 May 2010 - Attachment 12.

<sup>20</sup> Pasandaran, C. 2009, ‘Christmas Celebrated Peacefully in Indonesia’, *The Jakarta Globe*, 25 December <http://thejakartaglobe.com/home/christmas-celebrated-peacefully-in-indonesia/349225-> Accessed 10 February 2010 – Attachment 13.

## Attachments

1. US Department of State 2010, *International Religious Freedom Report 2009 – Indonesia*, 26 October.
2. Allard, T 2010, 'Islamic hardliners target Indonesian Church' *Sydney Morning Herald* 24 July <http://www.smh.com.au/world/islamic-hardliners-target-indonesian-christians-20100723-10oqi.html?skin=text-only> - Accessed 20 August 2010.
3. 'News by Country Search Results: Indonesia' 2010, Compass Direct website <http://www.compassdirect.org/?view=Search+results&query=indonesia&page=1> - Accessed 20 August 2010.
4. 'Countries at the Crossroads 2010 Country Report - Indonesia' 2010, Freedom House, Section 3.58 <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=140&edition=9&ccrpage=43&ccrcountry=188> - Accessed 25 August 2010.
5. Purdey, J. 2009, 'A common destiny. Challenges remain for Chinese Indonesians 10 years after reformasi', *Inside Indonesia*, March <http://www.insideindonesia.org/index.php/component/content/1168?task=view> - Accessed 5 May 2010.
6. Freedom House 2010, *Freedom in the World – Indonesia* <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2010&country=7841> - Accessed 5 May 2010.
7. Onishi, N. 2010, 'In Indonesia, Many Eyes Follow Money for Hajj', *New York Times*, 5 August <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/06/world/asia/06hajj.html> - Accessed 25 August 2010.
8. RRT Country Advice Service 2010, *Research Response IDN30246*, 26 June.
9. 'Bill against racial discrimination passed' 2008, *The Jakarta Post*, 29 October <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2008/10/29/bill-against-racial-discrimination-passed.html> – Accessed 3 November 2008.
10. US Department of State 2010, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2009 – Indonesia*, 11 March.
11. 'Chinese Indonesians recognize improvement' 2009, *The Jakarta Post*, 2 February.
12. Dante, D. 2010, 'Officer Happy Makes History for Chinese Indonesians', *Jakarta Globe*, 14 April <http://www.thejakartaglobe.com/culture/officer-happy-makes-history-for-chinese-indonesians/369442>- Accessed 5 May 2010.
13. Pasandaran, C. 2009, 'Christmas Celebrated Peacefully in Indonesia', *The Jakarta Globe* , 25 December <http://thejakartaglobe.com/home/christmas-celebrated-peacefully-in-indonesia/349225> – Accessed 10 February 2010.