CULTURAL OVERVIEW

Indonesia has the second fastest growing economy in the world, after China. At the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos in 2011, President Susilo Bambung Yudhoyono was quoted in the Atlantic as saying, “we will need to work together to manage the world economy so that it functions to meet our needs, rather than satisfying our greed.” Indonesia’s rapidly growing middle class envisions education as a means of achieving upward mobility, creating an urgent need for opportunities for quality higher education for Indonesian students. When Indonesian institutions of higher learning fell in international rankings earlier in the year, Pierre Marthinus lamented the fall in an opinion piece in the Jakarta Post. He noted the “close relationship between the production of knowledge and a country’s international power as well as prestige. A highly productive education system will supply the national economy with skilled graduates, produce and disseminate knowledge through its scientific research publications, and also provide policy inputs for various national stakeholders.” The Indonesian government continues to invest in education within the country while simultaneously building academic ties to other countries like the United States. Indonesian students who study abroad at colleges and universities in the U.S. (and Australia) have access to a highly productive education system, one that compliments Indonesia’s growing power and prestige. In the Chronicle of Higher Education, Indonesia’s vice president, Boedino, was quoted by Karin Fischer on Indonesia’s inability to meet the current demand for higher education saying, “It’s not enough if we go it alone.”
Early Kingdoms

As an archipelago rich in natural resources, the islands that comprise much of modern Indonesia have been continuously populated throughout human history. Veins of gold and silver running through the mountains; the presence of spice trees, like nutmeg and clove, in the forests; the fertile volcanic soil; the coral, shellfish, and fishes in the seas; as well as a convenient location for trade and conquest have made the islands attractive to visitors and vanquishers. The continuous influx of people has in turn produced a society whose ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity matches the geographic variety and biodiversity of the region.

Early kingdoms around Java and Sumatra assimilated Indian cultural influences in the form of the Hinduism, Sanskrit writing, and classical music and dance. Borobudur, a massive stone temple built in the 8th and 9th centuries in central Java attests to the power of the Buddhist Saliendra dynasty in that region and incorporates a variety of Indian architectural influences and stories. Forgotten for centuries, the temple became a world heritage site in the 1970’s and has been a popular destination for pilgrims ever since. Sunni Islam first came to Indonesia through India, but later Sufi teachings also influenced Islamic faith in the archipelago. Indonesia is the most populous Muslim country in the world today, although scattered pockets of heavily Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian communities remain.

The Colonial Era

Traces of Portuguese culture, transmitted during early efforts to dominate the spice trade, can still be detected hundreds of years later in the prevalence of Christians
on the island of Flores, a smattering of Portuguese last names, and a genre of Indonesian folk music called Keroncong, which contains assimilated fado instrumentation. At the end of the 17th century as Portuguese power waned, the Dutch began colonizing the Indonesian archipelago. They killed regional leaders, deported some populations, and enslaved others to work on extremely profitable nutmeg plantations. They called the colonies the Dutch East Indies or V.O.C. The Dutch consolidated their control of the region over the following centuries.

**Independence, Dictatorship, Democracy**

During WWII Japan invaded the Dutch East Indies and then withdrew at the end of the war. The Dutch attempted to reclaim their former colonies by fighting against the Indonesians until 1949 when the archipelago became a united and sovereign nation. John Seabrook, writing for the New Yorker, summed up the character and accomplishments of Sukarno, the nation’s first president:

*He was a charismatic leader who presented himself as the quintessential Indonesian, the man in whom all the inconsistencies and contradictions of the country were blended. His greatest achievement was to make the Sumatrans and Javanese and Timorese and Balinese proud to call themselves Indonesians. He created a national ideology (Pancasila) founded on five common principles that the people of all the islands are supposed to share: faith in God, civility, unity, representative government, and social justice. He also helped to promote the national language, Bahasa Indonesia.*
A failed coup in 1965 led to the massacre of hundreds of thousands of suspected communists and leftists. In 1966 General Suharto took power and by 1967 he made himself president. His dictatorship was marked by corruption and expansionist military policies that led to incorporation of East Timor. Under his rule the military and economy flourished and rampant corruption lined the pockets of the elite. Following the Asian economic crisis in 1997, political protests were met by violent crackdowns which in turn caused the riots that ended Suharto’s reign.

In the absence of colonial oppression, the uniting force of Sukarno’s charm, or Suharto’s powerful military, ethnic and regional conflicts continue to smolder. But governmental efforts to combat corruption, increase access to education, and the prosperity of a growing middle class have stabilized the region. And Indonesians still take pride in the religious tolerance that helped unify the independence movement, exemplified by the national motto, “unity in diversity.” In 2008 the U.S. State Department lifted an eight year ban on travel to Indonesia. And in 2010 Indonesia’s Constitutional Court announced a landmark decision that struck down a 50-year old law allowing the government to unilaterally ban books.

References:


bullish-on-asia-hopeful-for-europe-worried-by-egypt/70566/).


