

Chinese ties put Indonesia in a bind.

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GOING AGAINST THE HERD, WHEN IT'S NEEDED

DUNCAN GRAHAM



Many Chinese were killed indiscriminately

during the US-engineered anti-communist massacres of 1965.

Beijing has warned citizens against travel to Australia claiming 'a significant increase' in racial discrimination and violence against Chinese and Asians blamed for the Covid-19 pandemic.

No similar warnings have been made about Chinese visiting Indonesia where the threats are far more serious than midnight cowards spraying graffiti and drunks slurring abuse. In the nation next door discrimination is well embedded with little legal protection.

There are around three million ethnic Chinese in the country according to Indonesian government statistics, though some academics claim the real number is three to four times greater. Whatever, tiny figures in a population of 270 million. Yet the *Orang Tionghoa* wield huge business influence, drawing resentment which sometimes turns violent.

Among the earliest recorded massacres was in 1740 when Dutch soldiers and *pribumi* (native Javanese) killed an estimated 10,000 Chinese following an industrial dispute. Since then eruptions of hate have scarred the archipelago.

During its 1965-1990 anti-Red offensive Jakarta suspended diplomatic ties with Beijing, though backdoor deals continued throughout. Second president Soeharto relied on economic advice from local Chinese tycoons. He partnered with the convicted fraudster The Kiang Seng, better known as Bob Hasan, who died this year.

The 1998 economic crisis riots after Soeharto was forced out, took the lives of more than a thousand. There were stories of mobsters shouting *ganyang Cina babi* ('kill the Chinese pigs')

The US State Department reported allegations of mass gang-rapes of ethnic Chinese: 'A (government) fact-finding team

(ordered) to investigate the riots and rapes found that elements of the Indonesian Military Special Forces (*Kopassus*) had been involved in the riots, some of which were deliberately provoked'.

The Soeharto government banned ethnic Chinese from the public service and military. So the smart ones turned to banking, often succeeding brilliantly. Chinese languages and characters were also prohibited, a law only overthrown this century.

Once liberated many moved out of the shadows to celebrate their culture and assert their rights as citizens. In 2014 Jakarta vice-governor Basuki ('Ahok') Tjahaja Purnama slipped into the big chair when its occupant Joko Widodo became president. Foreign correspondents reckoned this demonstrated the decline of discrimination. They were wrong.

Although known as an efficient anti-corruption administrator, Ahok was also a Protestant. Islamic stirrers claimed only a Muslim can lead other Muslims when they're the majority.

Charges of blasphemy were engineered using an edited video. Mass demonstrations were organised with the present vice president Ma'ruf Amin playing a key role. Prosecutors demanded a one-year sentence. Ahok got two and was only freed this January.

His imprisonment spurred Singapore-based anthropologist Dr Charlotte Setijadi to research Sinophobia, writing: 'One of the most persistent stereotypes about Chinese Indonesians is that they are wealthy and economically dominant'.

Almost half her survey respondents agreed with negative sentiments that ethnic Chinese 'only care about their own kind' are 'too greedy and ambitious' and 'do not fit with Indonesian values'.

This year the Jakarta-based Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict revealed an unsuccessful plot to attack Chinese

workers in West Java. It reported:

'Intensified anti-Chinese rhetoric on some extremist social media sites does not appear to have been matched by any uptick in plots against Chinese targets but remains something to watch.'

'Much of the rhetoric has been purely racist hate speech. The question now is whether ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) supporters in Indonesia will use the coronavirus as an excuse to expand targeting beyond the police to domestic or international Chinese targets.'

Some ethnic Chinese families (*Peranakan*) have lived in the archipelago for centuries, are Indonesian citizens, sometimes Muslim converts, deeply involved in business and public affairs, and with no ties to the mainland.

Before the lockdowns tourism was surging despite the known racism, with the number of Chinese challenging Australians as top visitors to Bali.

Also coming through airport arrivals were specialist engineers temporarily working on Chinese-financed turnkey projects and stoking bitterness when locals discover the outsiders.

Ten Chinese heading to a nickel smelter construction site in South Sulawesi were reportedly turned away by local authorities this year. In the Riau Islands (a small archipelago southeast of Singapore) 39 workers at an aluminium plant were told to quit by authorities claiming they didn't have the right permits. There have been other incidents.

Professor Dewi Fortuna Anwar at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences reportedly described the general perception of China as 'very mixed'.

'There's always distrust based on history, politics and the social makeup of the two countries, as well as ethnicity. It's complex, and the issue of Chinese workers has been here for a few years following increased investment.'

Indonesia needs to dampen discrimination and disquiet as government statistics show investments from the Middle Kingdom of AUD 6.75 billion, making it the second-largest investor after Japan. Most of the money is for 2,000-plus public works, like toll roads, new railways and port upgrades which have benefitted corporates and citizens.

Widodo has told the media 'no one should be allergic to investment' and has been pushing legislation to scythe the nation's thickets of bureaucracy which deter bankers. But the proposed changes include slashing labour laws on severance pay, drawing hostility from unions. The bill is in lockdown, another victim of Covid-19.

While beckoning carriers of Yuan the President has been repelling trawlers harvesting the Natuna Sea which borders the South China Sea. These are choppy waters to navigate as the Communist state is pushing its so-called nine-dash line into territory claimed by Indonesia.

After an incursion of 60 boats protected by Chinese coastguards late last year a stern-faced Widodo posed aboard a warship while declaring his nation's territorial integrity 'non-negotiable'.

His posturing may have cooled local nationalists though not the foreign fishers who are allegedly still casting nets. Even if he felt like taking the media for another bracing day on the briny, Widodo can't afford to repeat macho-moments offshore when he has thousands of plague victims sick and dying onshore.

This isn't the time to declare your big benefactor is also a poacher. Nor, apparently, to tell citizens to avoid a nation where so much is invested.

Duncan Graham is an Australian journalist writing from Indonesia.



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