

# PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 27 September 2017

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## Chinese Indonesians in the Eyes of the *Pribumi* Public

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The racist rhetoric seen in the Ahok blasphemy case and during the Jakarta gubernatorial election held earlier this year sparked fresh concerns about growing anti-Chinese sentiments in Indonesia.
- To gauge public sentiments towards the ethnic Chinese, questions designed to prompt existing perceptions about Chinese Indonesians were asked in the Indonesia National Survey Project (INSP) recently commissioned by ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.
- The majority of *pribumi* ('native') survey respondents agreed to statements about Chinese Indonesians' alleged economic dominance and privilege, with almost 60% saying that ethnic Chinese are more likely than *pribumi* Indonesians to be wealthy.
- The survey confirmed the existence of negative prejudice against ethnic Chinese influence in Indonesian politics and economy, and many *pribumi* believe that Chinese Indonesians may harbour divided national loyalties.

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## ANTI-CHINESE SENTIMENTS IN INDONESIA

Chinese Indonesians have received considerable public attention in the past year, mostly because of the Jakarta gubernatorial election and blasphemy controversy involving Basuki “Ahok” Tjahaja Purnama.

A popular governor with consistently high approval ratings, Ahok, a Chinese and a Christian, was widely tipped to win the 2017 Jakarta election held earlier this year. This was of course until the now infamous blasphemy case over public comments that Ahok had made in September last year that allegedly insulted the Al-Maidah 51 verse of the Qur’an.<sup>1</sup> Within weeks, a series of mass protests organized by hard-line Islamist groups involving hundreds of thousands of angry Muslim protesters from all over Indonesia took place in Jakarta. These called for Ahok to be prosecuted for blasphemy or even be put to death, but increasingly – and almost predictably – the angry chants took a hateful and racist tone against the ethnic Chinese.

The rise of anti-Chinese narratives seen throughout the Jakarta election and the Ahok blasphemy case have prompted questions about whether old stereotypes and negative prejudices against the ethnic Chinese have persisted despite almost two decades of policy and societal reforms.

In the wake of the riots of 13-14 May 1998 and the fall of the Suharto regime which ushered in an era of *reformasi* (reform movement), discriminatory anti-Chinese policies were abolished and Chinese Indonesian organisations, media, languages and culture “returned” to the public eye after 32 years of forced assimilation under the New Order. Since then, Chinese Indonesians have generally displayed much optimism about their political situation and safety in Indonesia, particularly with their increased representation in mainstream politics, government, and civil society.<sup>2</sup>

However, increasingly negative sentiments against them in recent times have been disturbing. In fact, even before the Ahok blasphemy case, there had been several alarming instances that indicate a return – or at least a resurfacing – of anti-Chinese narratives. Anti-Ahok opposition and groups have publicly attacked him based on his Chinese ethnicity since before he first took office as Jakarta vice governor in 2012. This involve not only Ahok. During the 2014 presidential election, a black campaign against political ally Jokowi

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Setijadi, ‘Ahok’s Downfall and the Rise of Islamist Populism in Indonesia’, ISEAS Perspective, 2017, No. 38.

([https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2017\\_38.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_38.pdf)).

<sup>2</sup> Hoon, C.Y. (2008). *Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Culture, Politics and Media*. Sussex: Sussex Academic Press. See also Purdey, J. (2003). ‘Political Change Reopening the Asimilasi vs Integrasi Debate: Ethnic Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia’, *Asian Ethnicity* 4(3), pp. 421-437.

claimed that he is actually of Chinese descent.<sup>3</sup> Jokowi's campaign team was quick to deny allegations of Chinese ethnicity, but the very fact that such accusations needed to be publicly denied demonstrates the negative political connotations still strongly attached to Chineseness. More seriously, in July 2016, a complaint from an ethnic Chinese woman about the loud volume of a local mosque's call to prayer (*adzan*) in the Riau Islands Province's town of Tanjung Balai led to riots, looting, attacks, and the burning of several Buddhist and Chinese temples by an angry mob of hundreds.<sup>4</sup> Smaller incidents that had potential to spread into full-scale riots had been occurring since 1998, almost all of them initially caused by small disputes or misunderstandings that had to do with money or religion (or both).<sup>5</sup>

As has always been the case throughout Indonesia's history, contemporary anti-Chinese sentiments have complex intersections with issues of class and religion. While religion now features much more predominantly than in the past, class has continued to be an important element that shape how the *pribumi* public perceives Chinese Indonesians. Indeed, as has been pointed out elsewhere, even in the Ahok blasphemy case, class was a key element and public anger towards Ahok was amplified by the fact that many of his policies – such as the forced evictions of *kampung* (urban village) communities along the riverbanks and the controversial Jakarta Cove land reclamation project – had severely disadvantaged the poor.<sup>6</sup>

Very soon after the Ahok case, Bachtiar Nasir, an influential Ulama from an organization called Young Ulama and Intellectuals Council of Indonesia (MIUMI), who was also one of the leaders of the anti-Ahok protests, stated that ethnic Chinese wealth would be the next target of Islamist protesters.<sup>7</sup> It also emerged that Vice President Jusuf Kalla had made a statement implying that most rich people in Indonesia are of Chinese descent – who are

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<sup>3</sup> 'Shambolic election campaign leaves Indonesia's president-elect much to prove', <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-election-brink-insight/shambolic-election-campaign-leaves-indonesias-president-elect-much-to-prove-idUSKBN0GR28Q20140827>, accessed 31 August 2017.

<sup>4</sup> 'Amuk Massa di Tanjung Balai, Vihara dan Kelenteng Dibakar' ['Angry Mob in Tanjung Balai, Vihara and Temple Burnt'], [http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita\\_indonesia/2016/07/160730\\_indonesia\\_rusuh\\_tanjung\\_balai](http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2016/07/160730_indonesia_rusuh_tanjung_balai), accessed 31 August 2017.

<sup>5</sup> For instance, a neighbourhood disagreement over alleged damages on a parked car resulted in the assault of an ethnic Chinese man in the Kalimantan city of Pontianak in 6 December 2007. The incident – known as the 'Alleyway 17' incident after the name of the street the dispute initially took place in – quickly escalated to small-scale rioting where angry Malay mobs attacked a local Chinese temple and destroyed a number of Chinese-owned properties. (<http://www.antaraneews.com/print/86141/kota-pontianak-siaga-satu>, accessed 12 September 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Ian Wilson, 'Jakarta: inequality and the poverty of elite pluralism', *New Mandala*, 19 April 2017 (<http://www.newmandala.org/jakarta-inequality-poverty-elite-pluralism/>).

<sup>7</sup> 'Exclusive - Indonesian Islamist leader says ethnic Chinese wealth is next target', <http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-indonesia-politics-cleric-exclusive/exclusive-indonesian-islamist-leader-says-ethnic-chinese-wealth-is-next-target-idUSKBN18817N>, accessed 11 September 2017.

mostly Christians and Confucians – while the poor are Muslim *pribumi*.<sup>8</sup> Not long after, Commander of the Indonesian Armed Forces General Gatot Nurmantyo caused controversy when, during a speech given to the Golkar Party National Leadership Conference on 22 May 2017, he read a poem implying that too much of Indonesia's wealth is owned by non-*pribumi*.<sup>9</sup> The overlap of religion, class issues, and ethno-nationalism in the recent rise in anti-Chinese sentiments remains clear.

## **SURVEY QUESTIONS ON CHINESE INDONESIANS**

In May 2016, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute commissioned a nationwide survey in Indonesia. Called the Indonesia National Survey Project (INSP) this survey was designed to enhance understanding of economic, social, and political developments in Indonesia. Administered in partnership with *Lembaga Survei Indonesia* (LSI, Indonesian Survey Institute) between 20 and 30 May 2017, the public opinion data were collected from a large sample of 1,620 respondents from various ethno-linguistic, class, and religious backgrounds in all 34 provinces in Indonesia. Conducted in the wake of the Jakarta gubernatorial election, the findings of this survey provide important data for understanding recent cleavages in Indonesian politics and society.

The survey featured a list of long-held prejudicial statements concerning Chinese Indonesians to measure the degree to which these sentiments are still held. The sentences/questions were organised based on three broad themes pertaining to perceptions of ethnic Chinese wealth, political and economic influence, and social behaviours. In response to each statement, respondents were asked to measure their level of agreement or disagreement on a five-point scale. Only *pribumi* survey participants were asked to respond to these questions.

### *Chinese Indonesians as economically privileged*

One of the most persistent stereotypes about Chinese Indonesians is that they are wealthy and economically dominant. This is a stereotype with a long historical precedence from the Dutch colonial era when the ethnic Chinese were segregated as a separate racial category as “Foreign Orientals”, and often played a middleman role in trade dealings between the Dutch and the *Inlander*.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, this stereotype was further perpetuated during the

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Kalla Defends Comment About Chinese Wealth After Criticism’, <http://m.thejakartaglobe.com/politics/kalla-defends-comment-about-chinese-wealth-after-criticism/>, accessed 11 September 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Leo Suryadinata, ‘General Gatot and the Re-emergence of Pribumi-ism in Indonesia’, ISEAS Perspective, 2017, No. 49 ([https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2017\\_49.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2017_49.pdf))

<sup>10</sup> Coppel, C (1983). *Indonesian Chinese in Crisis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. See also Suryadinata, L (2005). *Pribumi Indonesians, the Chinese Minority, and China: A Study of Perceptions and Policies*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish International

assimilation period under the New Order (1966-1998) when Chinese Indonesians were discouraged from entering politics, civil, and military service, thus confining them further to the commercial sectors. Chinese business tycoons such as Liem Sioe Liong (Sudono Salim) who were close to the Suharto family and had other *pribumi* political elites as business partners did little to quell the perception of the ethnic Chinese not only as disproportionately wealthy but also as being opportunistic and politically influential.<sup>11</sup>

In the post-Suharto era, this perception of ethnic Chinese wealth is still widespread despite the fact that there have been more efforts to publicise the fact that the vast majority of Chinese Indonesians are not wealthy tycoons, and that many ethnic Chinese are poor and live a rural existence.<sup>12</sup> To be sure ethnic Chinese individuals and well-known families such as the Hartonos, Salims, Widjajas, and Riadys are extremely wealthy, and their visibility in the media and public life projects the image of Chinese economic dominance. For instance, eight out of the 2016 ten richest Indonesians according to Forbes magazine are ethnic Chinese.<sup>13</sup>

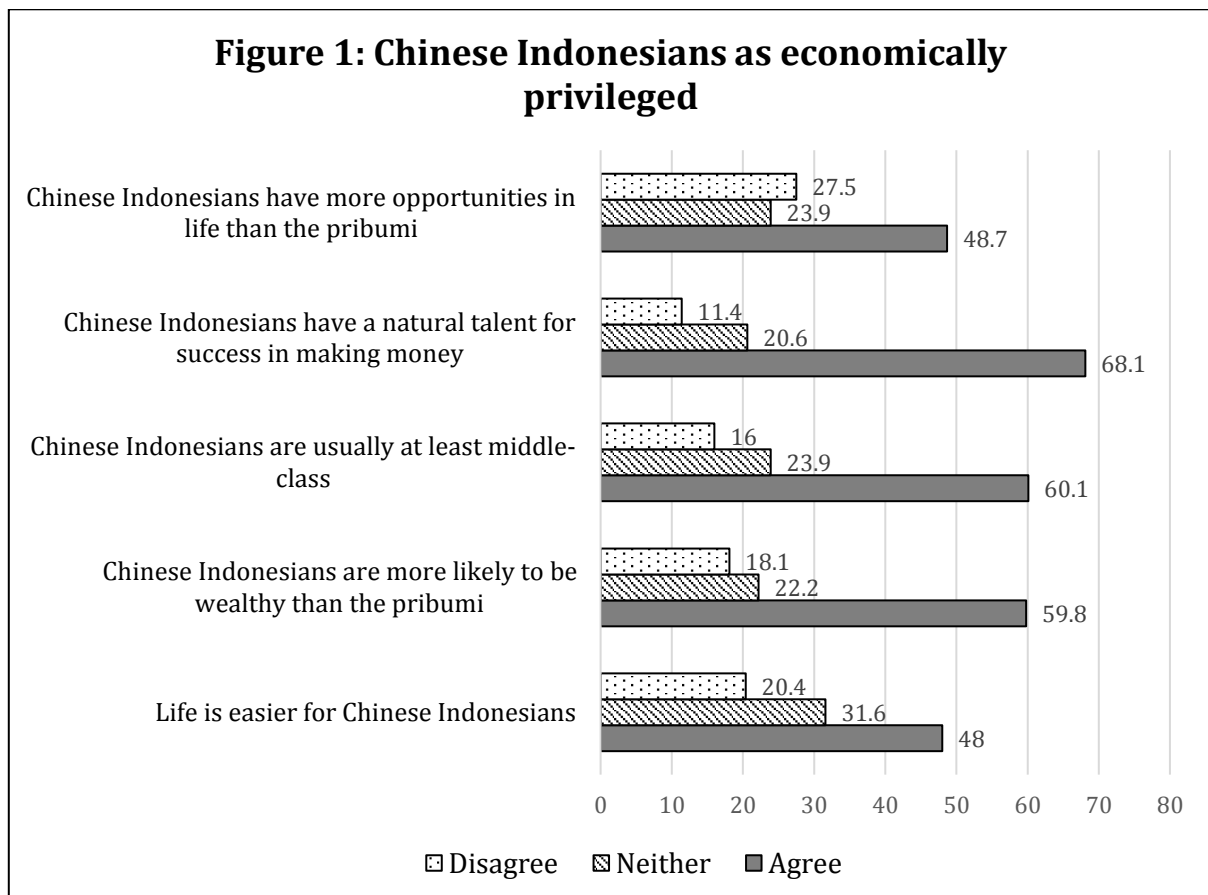
Indeed, as seen in Figure 1, when our survey respondents were shown the following statements pertaining to perceptions of ethnic Chinese wealth and economic acumen, the majority agreed that Chinese Indonesians are “more likely to be wealthy than *pribumi*” (59.8% agreed) and that they are “usually at least middle-class” (60.1%). Because of this perceived economic privilege, life is thus “easier for Chinese Indonesians” (48% agreed) and the Chinese have more opportunities in life than indigenous Indonesians (48.7% agreed).

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<sup>11</sup> Chua, C (2008). *Chinese Big Business in Indonesia: The State of Capital*. London: Routledge.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, television programs and news reports raise stories of Chinese Indonesian communities in rural areas such as the *Cina Benteng* (‘Fortress Chinese’) community in the western outskirts of Jakarta who have lived as farmers for centuries. Recently, a *Cina Benteng* museum was established in Tangerang regency of Banten province to showcase the history and culture of this little-known community.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Forbes: Indonesia’s 50 Richest’, <https://www.forbes.com/indonesia-billionaires/list/#tab:overall>, accessed 1 September 2017.

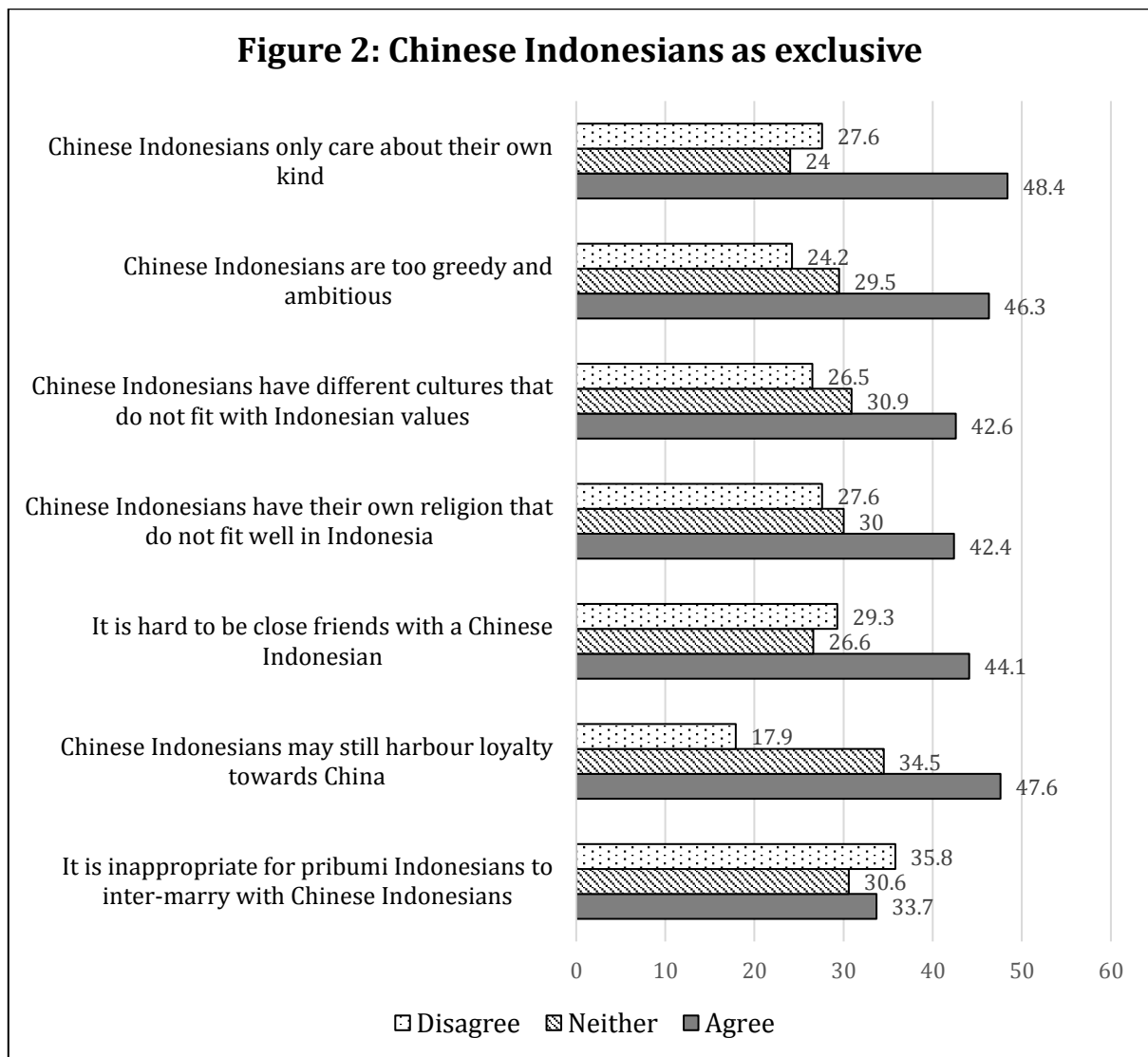


Source: Indonesia National Survey Project

While these perceptions of the Chinese are certainly not new, the extent to which the survey respondents overwhelmingly agreed to all these statements is surprising. There is an element of primordialism in in how one statement in particular – that “Chinese Indonesians have a natural talent for success in making money” – exceeds the rest in terms of respondents that agree with it (68.1%).

*Chinese Indonesians as exclusive*

This sense of primordialism where Chinese Indonesians are perceived to possess certain characteristics that lead to irreconcilable differences is also reflected in other survey responses concerning religion and culture. As seen in Figure 2, the majority of respondents feel that Chinese Indonesians have their own religion (42.4% agreed) and culture (42.6% agreed) that do not fit well in Indonesia. Furthermore, most respondents blame the Chinese themselves for their inability to integrate into Indonesian society. Here, 48.4% agree that they “only care about their own kind”, and 46.3% agree that Chinese Indonesians are “too greedy and ambitious”.



Source: Indonesia National Survey Project

Interestingly, while 44.1% of respondents agree that perceived essential differences in culture, character and religion mean that “it is hard to be a close friend with a Chinese Indonesian”, 35.8% of respondents do not see any problem inter-marrying with an ethnic Chinese. This could be the historical legacy of centuries of inter-marriage between the Chinese and *pribumi*, where, because of perceptions of Chinese Indonesian wealth, many *pribumi* view marriage with an ethnic Chinese as economically advantageous. From the Chinese perspective, particularly during the New Order, marriage into a *pribumi* family was a good way to assimilate and to show willingness to embrace the local culture, particularly if the ethnic Chinese in question also converted to Islam.



However, what is both interesting and worrying is that a considerable 47.6% of respondents agree that “Chinese Indonesians may still harbour loyalty towards China,” even though almost all ethnic Chinese in Indonesia today are Indonesian citizens.<sup>14</sup>

It must be remembered that this perception exists within very specific local, regional, and global contexts. The dark historical legacy of assimilation and the associated suspicions of Chinese Indonesians as agents of communist China in the late 1960s mean that most Chinese Indonesians today still harbour the fear of being perceived of being too close to China.

As China rises as a regional and global power, its direct investments and its economic and strategic interest in Indonesia have grown more than ever before. The Indonesian government has mostly been more than happy to receive Chinese investments, especially since these are required to fund Jokowi’s many ambitious infrastructure projects. However, domestically, there have been cases of backlash over what has been perceived as the current government’s overt closeness to, and reliance on China. For instance, when Jokowi’s administration awarded the Jakarta-Bandung high-speed rail project to China instead of Japan after an opaque tender process, opposition politicians and the media quickly accused Jokowi of being China’s pawn.<sup>15</sup> Around the time of the Jakarta gubernatorial election, fake news, such as those claiming that both Jokowi and Ahok were agents of the Chinese state, went rampant on social media.<sup>16</sup> Such sentiments highlight how, despite much improved relations between China and Indonesia, many *pribumi* Indonesians still have a deep sense of distrust towards China.

The perception that Chinese Indonesians may still harbour loyalty towards China is dangerous for the ethnic Chinese, especially at a time of rising anti-Chinese sentiments.

### *Chinese Indonesian influence in politics*

In the aftermath of the Jakarta gubernatorial election we asked survey respondents to consider questions to do with Chinese Indonesians’ influence and role in politics. A fair amount of respondents (41.9%) agreed with the statement “Chinese Indonesians have too much influence in Indonesian politics”. This number is low when compared to the 62% who think that Chinese Indonesians have too much influence in the Indonesian economy.

The responses become more interesting when we asked more specific questions about whether they are comfortable with a Chinese Indonesian in a position of political leadership. The majority (64.4%) are uncomfortable with the notion, with no significant differences

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<sup>14</sup> Fossati, D., Hui, Y-F & Dharma Negara, S. (2017). “The Indonesia National Survey Project: Economy, Society and Politics.” ISEAS Trends in Southeast Asia No. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Siwage Dharma Negara & Wilmar Salim, ‘Why is the High-Speed Rail Project so Important to Indonesia?’ ISEAS Perspective 2016 No. 16.

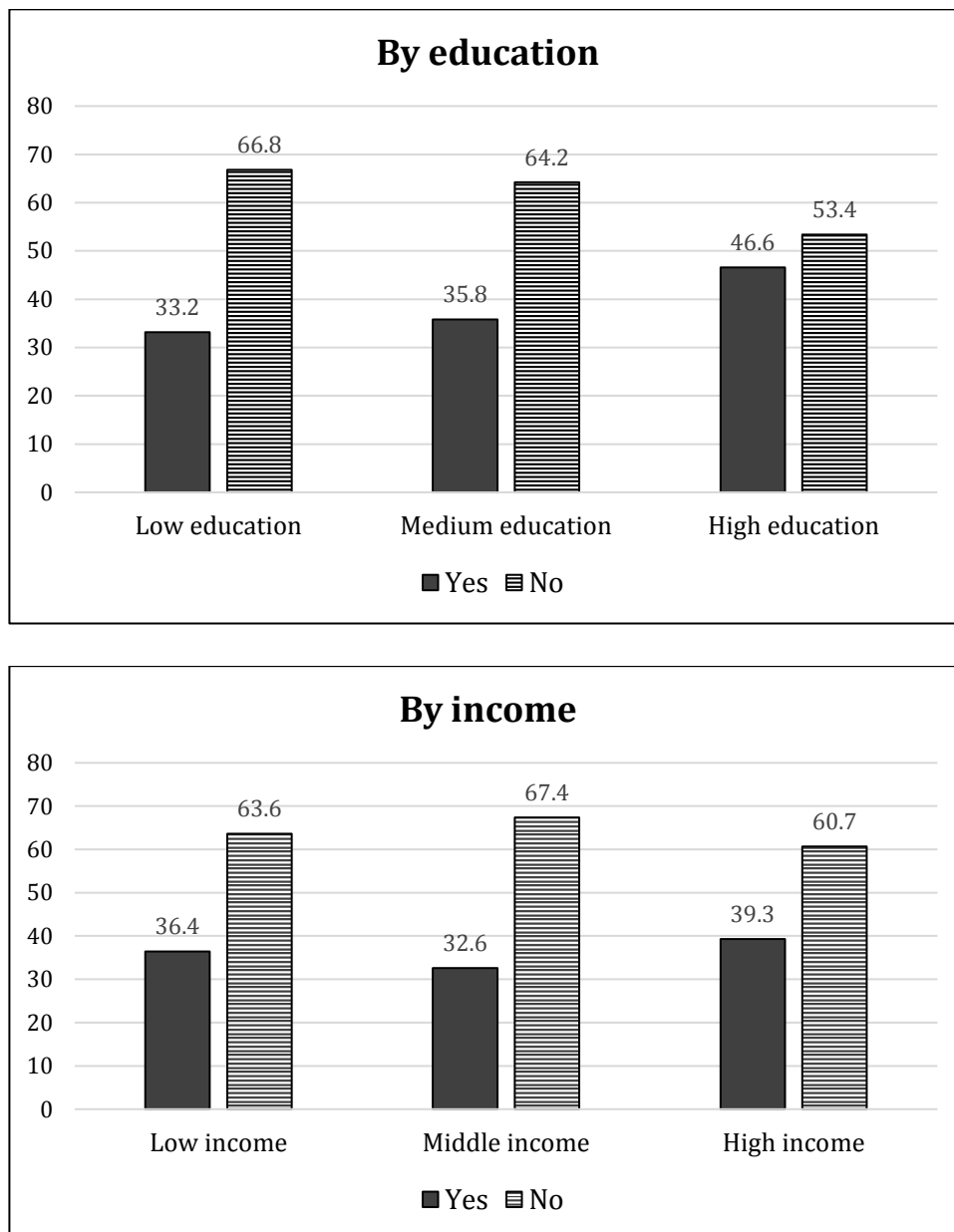
([https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS\\_Perspective\\_2016\\_16.pdf](https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2016_16.pdf)).

<sup>16</sup> Lim, M. "Freedom to Hate: Social Media, Algorithmic Enclaves, and the Rise of Tribal Nationalism in Indonesia," *Critical Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (2017), pp. 411-427.



being visible where gender and urban-rural locations are concerned.<sup>17</sup> However, as seen in Figure 4, the more educated the respondent is, the more likely he or she will be comfortable about having a Chinese Indonesian as political leader.

**Figure 4: Demographic breakdown of responses to “Are you comfortable with a Chinese Indonesian in a position of political leadership?”**

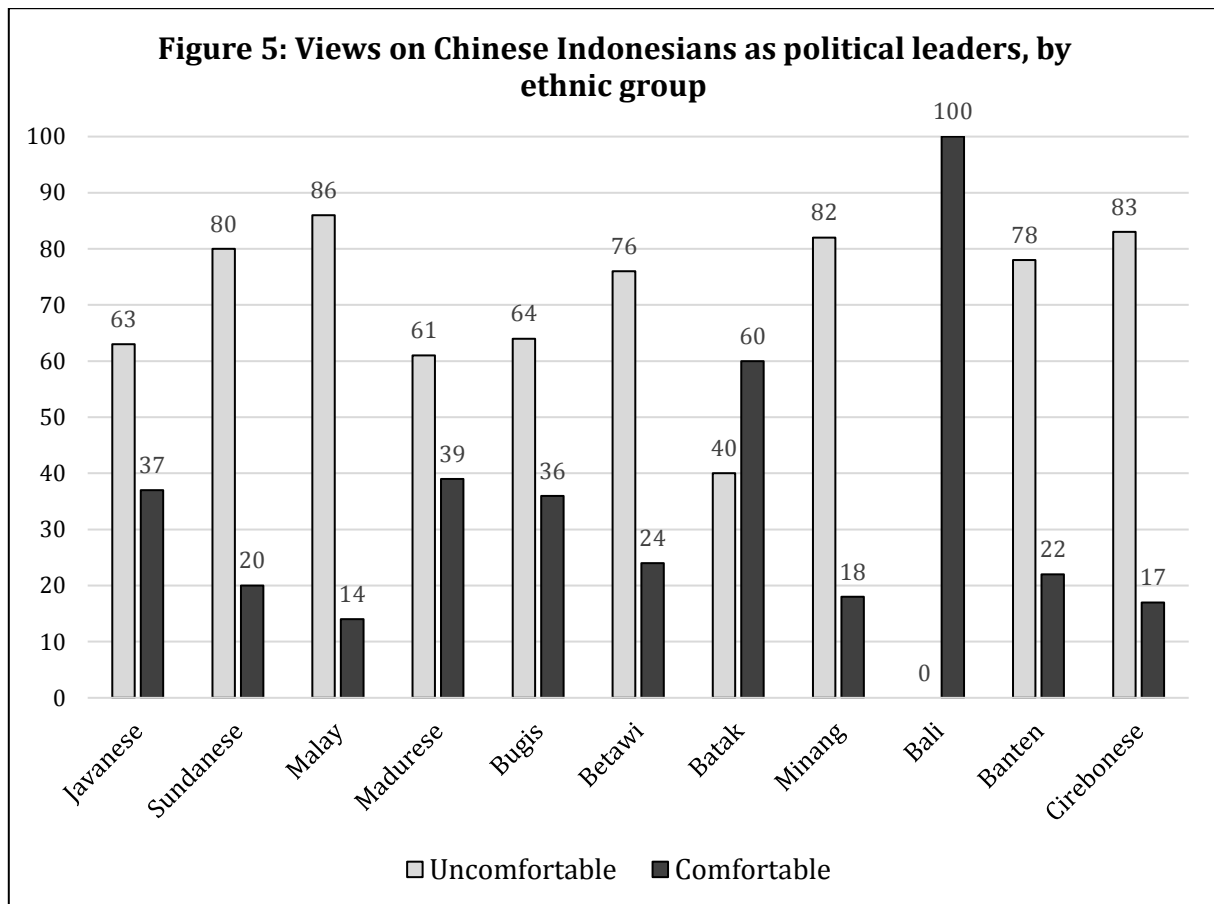


Source: Indonesia National Survey Project

<sup>17</sup> Fossati, et, al. The Indonesia National Survey Project.

The correlation is less clear where income level is concerned. Those at the middle income level are the most uncomfortable with the idea of ethnic Chinese in a position of political power.

Interesting patterns also emerge when we examine a cross-section of respondents, based on their ethnic/tribal (*suku*) groups. As seen in Figure 5, only the Bataks (60%) and Balinese (100%) are more comfortable with Chinese Indonesians in political positions.<sup>18</sup> The *suku* who are the least comfortable with the notion of Chinese Indonesians in political office are the Malays, Cirebonese, Minangkabau and Sundanese.<sup>19</sup>



Source: Indonesia National Survey Project

This result is in some ways not surprising, and indicates an overlap with religion. Hindu-majority Balinese people are traditionally known to be open and pluralistic in attitude, in no small part owing to their exposure to the many tourists that visit the island of Bali each year.

<sup>18</sup> As our research design did not produce representative samples of ethnic groups, our inferences regarding variation across ethnic groups should be interpreted with caution. The largest groups in our sample were the Javanese (685 respondents), Madurese (227) and Malay (66). For other minority groups, the figures were based on a lower number of respondents, given the smaller size of such groups as a share of the general Indonesian population.

<sup>19</sup> Fossati, et. al. The Indonesia National Survey Project.

Originally from highland north Sumatra, the Batak ethnic group is 75% Christian, making them one of the few Christian-majority indigenous ethnic groups in Indonesia. The Batak people are also known to be highly educated and often rise to prominence in white-collar professions as well as in politics and the military. In many ways, the Balinese and Bataks are also ethnic and religious minorities like the ethnic Chinese, so it is not surprising that they are least bothered with the idea of Chinese Indonesians being in a position of political power.

It must be remembered however that these responses to prompts about ethnic Chinese in positions of political power were undoubtedly influenced by Ahok's recent political prominence and subsequent scandals. It would be interesting to track how public perception of Chinese Indonesians' political influence changes over time after the Ahok controversy dies down, and also around the future regional/national elections in which ethnic Chinese candidates contest for political office.

## **CONCLUSION: ETHNIC CHINESE IN CONTEMPORARY NATIONAL DISCOURSE**

The results of the INSP questions on Chinese Indonesians are generally negative. Across all the survey questions, we see strong evidence of negative perceptions about ethnic Chinese economic privilege, exclusivity, influence in politics, and national loyalty.

However, since the survey was done in the aftermath of the Jakarta election and the Ahok blasphemy case, perhaps it should not be too much of a surprise for us to see heightened negativity towards Chinese Indonesians. Events seen earlier this year are in many ways unique, in no small part owing to the fact that Ahok himself is a unique politician whose character and actions inspired divided (and often extreme) opinions about Chinese Indonesians and their role in Indonesian politics, economy, and society. As the country moves on, we can expect opinions of Chinese Indonesians to improve over time.

Be that as it may, the results of the survey are alarming because they show that, despite the reforms of the past two decades, old stereotypes of ethnic Chinese still persist and are perhaps stronger than before. Assumptions about essential differences between ethnic Chinese and *pribumi* continue to feed the narrative of the Chinese being outsiders who can never really belong in Indonesia. Rising Islamic conservatism and economic inequality only heighten this notion of essential difference, making Chinese Indonesians more vulnerable as targets of the public's anger and frustration.

Results from our survey serve as yet another reminder that dealing with the Chinese "problem" and maintaining inter-ethnic/inter-religious harmony require continuous hard work. Complacency is not something that Indonesia's liberals can afford, and Jokowi's government must show that they are committed to protecting the safety and rights not only of the ethnic Chinese, but of all minority groups. However, as long as rising economic

inequality continues to be a national issue, then public anger will likely continue to manifest itself in greater intolerance towards Chinese Indonesians.

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