

Semarang and the Northern Coast of Java

With a population of 124 million people, the Indonesian island of Java is the most populous island in the world. Over 90% of inhabitants of the island are Muslims — accounting for almost 10% of the Muslim population worldwide. The very first Muslim kingdom on the island of Java was founded in 1511 at Demak in Central Java, and Islam spread throughout the island from there. Demak's three-tiered Grand Mosque is a blend of Hindu and Islamic architecture and is considered very holy. Some Javanese Muslims even believe that seven visits to this mosque equals one visit to Mecca.

In the 16th century Islam was spread on the island of Java by traveling religious teachers. This group of nine men was called the Wali Songo, the nine ambassadors of Islam. They were important religious teachers who supposedly did powerful and miraculous acts across the island. The histories of these men are not always clear, but their tombs are often visited by local Muslims seeking supernatural help and blessing.

By its size and population, Semarang is the fifth largest city of Indonesia (at least 1.5 million inhabitants). It is situated on Java's northern coast. From the Candi Hill in Semarang, one can see striking panoramas in all directions: the port and the sea, the lowlands and green rice paddies, the city itself and several volcanic mountains in the distance. In the older part of the city, close to its ocean harbor, one can still find buildings dating back to the Dutch colonial era. Yet the heart of the city has moved to Simpang Lima Square, which

A sign in front of the Demak mosque. The Arabic words mean "God is judge" and "God loves." These are two of the 99 names which Muslims attribute to Allah.



hosts a beautiful modern shopping center, a huge mosque and cinema complexes. Events, activities and changes in Semarang affect the entire region.

While Indonesian Christians live among large populations of Muslims, the two communities are largely separate and many Christians are fearful. Literally hundreds of church buildings have been burned and thousands of believers persecuted in Indonesia in recent years. Unfortunately Muslims often associate Christianity with the immoral behavior of some nominal Christians.



The people living in and around Semarang are known as the Jawa Pesisir Lor. They are only one of the hundreds of ethnic groups found in Indonesia, but they are very significant because of their numbers and Islamic commitment. Their population of about 18,600,000 is split into two main groups west and east of Semarang. Many Jawa Pesisir Lor view traditional Javanese culture as backward and are proud of what they consider to be their more modern world-view and stronger Islamic commitment.

The vast majority of Jawa Pesisir Lor are Sunni Muslims, though there are also some Sufis among them. Unlike many other Javanese ethnic groups, they traditionally tend to prefer Islamic music to Javanese music and Qur'an readings to watching traditional shadow puppet plays. However, occultism is still frequently practiced by many Jawa Pesisir Lor, along with syncretistic elements of Hinduism and animism. The younger generation, here as elsewhere, is being greatly influenced by the global youth culture.



Above: A modern shopping centre in Semarang and the central market.

Below: The shrine of Admiral Zheng He who was among the very first Muslims to visit the area.



PRAYER REQUESTS

- ▶ *It is a point of spiritual pride locally that Islam was first established in this region in Java. Pray that people could see the glory of the Lord Jesus and live in awe of Him. (Daniel 4:37)*
- ▶ *Pray that more religious leaders and teachers will come to the Messiah, influencing their followers for the kingdom of God (Acts 6:7).*
- ▶ *Pray that the love and grace of Jesus the Messiah (Isa Al Masih) would become more and more evident, tearing down the proud arguments falsely set up against the Lord and His followers (2 Cor 10:4-5 and Mt 10:16).*
- ▶ *Pray that believers will be protected from curses sent from dukuns (practitioners of black magic). Spiritual darkness is very present (Ephesians 6).*

Also pray for ...

- ▶ *Please continue to pray for Aceh province in Sumatra. Possibly 100,000 people in the area are still very poorly housed following the Dec. 2004 earthquake and tsunami.*