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Labor and Conflict in Southeast Asia

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INTRODUCTION

LABOR migration is an important process in Southeast Asia, the second busiest hub of transnational migration in the world after the US–Mexico border. Cross-border labor flows in Southeast Asia have deepened regional interdependence. Migrant workers have contributed to key economic sectors in receiving countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, while labor outmigration has reduced employment pressures and offered remittances to sending countries like the Philippines and Indonesia.

But despite its economic value, labor migration in Southeast Asia is controversial. For receiving countries, migrant workers are often considered a security problem threatening both the state and particular societal

Labor migration in Southeast Asia is controversial. Receiving countries often see migrant workers as a security problem, while sending countries are upset over the often tenuous plight of their nationals abroad.

Malaysian operations against undocumented foreign guest workers, and the securitization of these workers, have been the cause of inter-state labor migration conflicts with Indonesia and the Philippines in recent years.

Because the securitization of workers increases the likelihood of bilateral conflicts, existing bilateral and multilateral frameworks must be strengthened. In particular, binding bilateral or regional agreements with clear standards for the treatment of migrant workers must be developed.

groups. For sending countries, domestic anger over the often tenuous plight of their nationals abroad can stoke resentment towards the government and society of their hosts.

In such situations, although economic interdependence might be expected to make such conflicts easier to address, labor migration can act to inflame bilateral relations. The way in which migrant workers are securitized is vital for explaining the origins of such conflicts. Labor migration has the potential to evoke emotional responses in both their host and home societies, since it raises issues both about *who gets what* and about *how people are treated*. Both economic and ideational factors play a key role in mediating how these issues are managed.

Over the last decade, two main labor migration conflicts have arisen in Southeast Asia, between Malaysia and the Philippines and Malaysia and Indonesia. Both were catalyzed by security-motivated operations against undocumented migrant workers in Malaysia. However, the two bilateral conflicts followed radically different trajectories – with the role of emotions in the home state, and the discursive construction of the security threat posed by different migrant groups in Malaysia determining how these conflicts evolved.

SECURITIZING MIGRANT WORKERS

The Malaysian economy is highly dependent upon large numbers of migrant workers from neighboring Southeast Asian countries. By official figures, some 3 million workers (or 25 percent of the Malaysian labor force) are foreign migrants, although estimates of undocumented workers suggest the real proportion may be as high as 40 percent. They are particularly important to Malaysia's manufacturing, construction, and agriculture sectors, and primarily come from Indonesia, Nepal, and the Philippines.

Malaysia has a long history of uneasiness regarding these workers. Disquiet over their number began in the 1980s, when public discourse began to frame them as taking jobs from ethnic Malays and spreading for-

eign forms of religion. While periodic governmental crackdowns occurred during the 1980s and 1990s, these were usually quickly rescinded due to growing demand for labor and the economic benefits that migrant workers brought.

However, a new political discourse about migrant workers emerged in Malaysia in the 2000s. Promoted by nationalist civil society groups and some sections of the media, this new discourse increasingly framed labor migration as a security rather than economic threat. It depicted foreign workers not only as a security threat to the state and economic threat to Malaysian workers, but also as undesirable and criminal elements of society.

Responding to increasing public disquiet, the Malaysian government undertook two major crackdowns on migrant workers – *Ops Nyah II Bersepadu* in 2002 and *Ops Tegas* in 2005. These roundups respectively resulted in 400,000 and 350,000 migrant workers (predominantly Filipino and Indonesian) either leaving voluntarily or being deported. The 2005 crackdown proved extremely contentious, with *Rela* – a minimally-trained corps of citizen volunteers legally empowered to enforce the operation – being accused of brutality and unprofessionalism in its conduct.

MIGRATION-DRIVEN CONFLICTS

Malaysia's migrant worker crackdowns have driven conflicts with both the Indonesian and Philippine governments, who each raised labor migration issues to the top of bilateral agendas following Malaysia's first operation in 2002. However, these two inter-state conflicts have taken radically different trajectories – with the Malaysia–Philippines dispute quickly contained, but the Malaysia–Indonesia dispute becoming a structural feature of bilateral relations.

In the Philippine case, governmental protests regarding the treatment of its nationals during the 2002 operation led to requests for a Malaysian investigation into alleged cases of judicial abuse. The Malaysian government not only agreed to this request, but also went further by reassuring the Philippines that it was not specifically targeting its nationals on the basis of ethnicity. Official commitments to re-hire large numbers of the deported workers quickly defused the conflict.

However, the conflict with Indonesia has proven more difficult to contain. Civil society groups in Indonesia were enraged by what they considered dehumanizing treatment of its nationals, with many NGOs, labor organizations, and parliamentarians denouncing the operations at anti-Malaysian rallies held throughout the country. The use of caning – a humiliating and potentially disabling punishment – against Indonesian workers detained during the two operations further stoked resentment at the perceived abuse.

Official Indonesian responses to the operations reflected these nationalist sentiments, and were



Photo: Frisno

more confrontational than those of the Philippines. In the wake of the 2005 *Ops Tegas*, the Indonesian government deliberately blocked Malaysian attempts to re-hire many of the deported workers, leading to labor shortages in several industries. It banned Indonesian domestic workers from travelling to Malaysia until a strict set of employment conditions were guaranteed, resulting in a serious shortage of domestic workers. In a further move, Indonesia also sought to link the labor migration issue to a dispute over the Ambalat maritime border.

LABOR MIGRATION AND INTER-STATE CONFLICT

Malaysia's two migrant labor-driven conflicts have decidedly discursive bases. The country's increasing securitization of foreign workers has driven inter-state disputes with both of its main labor suppliers. However, its conflicts have also been affected by the way in which these workers have been securitized, with the particular targeting of Indonesian workers in security discourses stoking emotion-driven responses from both Indonesian society and its government.

These conflicts over labor migration have also threatened to spill over into other areas of bilateral relations. Indonesia has retaliated by withholding the supply of labor, and linking the issue to its broader maritime disputes with Malaysia. The conflict has become a structural feature of relations between Malaysia and Indonesia, although more recently, having recognized its reliance on Indonesian domestic workers (maids), Malaysia has begun the process of change in its treatment of migrant workers.

These cases show that increasing economic interdependence alone is not sufficient to ensure that conflicts over labor migration will not happen or will be immediately and easily addressed if they do. Both sending and receiving countries must go beyond existing weak bilateral and multilateral frameworks and develop stronger agreements for the better treatment of migrant workers. ■

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