

## BEYOND SECURITISATION: EMERGING ISSUES AND EVOLVING PERCEPTIONS ON MIGRANTS IN MALAYSIA

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### ABSTRACT

*Malaysia is one of the most important recipient countries of migrants in Southeast Asia. The large presence of migrants, both legal and illegal from different countries in the region and beyond has its own opportunities and problems. There is no doubt that they contributed to the economic development of the country, but at the same time the uncontrolled presence of illegal migrants posed security challenges forcing the government to launch a series of operations to control and deter them from entering the country. The securitisation efforts of the 1980s through to 1990s and the early millennium left an important mark on the perceptions of the Malaysian public on migrants. With securitisation taking a low profile, though not abandoned, migrants have increasingly come to focus on the socio-economic and cultural dimensions. This article aims to highlight the emerging issues and the evolving perceptions concerning migrants in Malaysia. It will relate some of the concerns of the public with regards to the presence of these migrants. It is suggested that a good migrant management will contribute to the creation of socio-economic and cultural conditions desirable to achieve societal well-being and stability which are necessary components in safeguarding Malaysia's national security.*

**Keywords:** securitisation, perceptions, issues, migrant management.

### INTRODUCTION

International migration is one of the most cited areas in the new security agenda which emerged at the end of the Cold War. The current 'migrant crisis' in Europe is a grim reminder that migration still constitutes security, political, social and humanitarian challenges to states and societies. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) (2015) defines migration as:

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*The movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a state. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification.*

In Malaysia, majority of migrants came in search of economic and social opportunities. However, there are those who came to Malaysia to escape conflicts and persecution in their countries of origin. In Malaysia, migration came to be viewed as a security issue since the end of 1980s and peaked by the end of 1990s. By the new millennium, the securitisation of migrants was still around, but perceptions and response to the issue of migration in Malaysia began to evolve. The emerging perception and attitude towards the issue of migration has created a more flexible environment in dealing with migrant issues in the country. Changing domestic situation in Malaysia and the evolving external political and security environments have contributed to the emergence of this new 'look' at issues related to migrants in the country. While migration in Malaysia can still be justifiably considered as a national security issue, the human security aspect of migration and its socio-economic impact have also received a lot of interest as reflected in many recent debates, research and academic literature on the subject.

## **MIGRANTS IN MALAYSIA**

Malaysia is not new to migration. More than a century ago, migrant workers from China and India was brought over by the British colonial power to work in plantations and mining sectors of the Malayan economy. Contemporary migration to Malaysia in the form of migrant workers first arrived in the early 1970s. In the beginning they came illegally through what is known as "lorong tikus" (rats' trail) at borders between Malaysia and neighbouring countries. They also worked illegally in this country. In the 1980s, the arrival of these illegal migrants or "PATI" (Pendatang Tanpa Izin) largely increased until it created concern to the authorities because of their implications on national security. According to Amarjit Kaur (2015), in the early 1980s, policies on hiring less-skilled workers in labour-intensive sectors were devised on ad hoc basis to meet enterprises urgent labour needs and Malaysia turned a blind eye to the recruitment of irregular workers from Indonesia and Thailand. One of the consequences was it created a large inflow of illegal migrants especially from Indonesia. In East Malaysia, particularly in Sabah, the influx of illegal migrants came mainly from the Philippines as a

result of the political instability and poverty in south Philippines. In 1991, the government of Malaysia introduced a policy on the employment of foreign workers in the country to better manage their presence and also with the hope to reduce the number of illegal immigrants. However, this did not help to reduce their arrival as Malaysia continued to receive more migrants, both legal and illegal. In 1993, it was revealed that the number of legal foreign workers in Malaysia was around half a million, but it increased to 2.31 million in 2015. As for the illegal migrants, the number varied around 1.3 to 4 million depending on the sources. (Azizah, 2015)

Foreigners living in Malaysia fall into several categories, namely expatriates, legal foreign workers, illegal foreign workers, political asylum seekers and refugees, international students, participants of Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) and permanent residents. The groups that caused concern to authorities were foreign workers (both legal and illegal) and asylum seekers including refugees. The presence of other categories of foreigners in general was not a cause for concern to authorities or to the general public; on the contrary, their presence is encouraged or welcome. It was the large uncontrolled arrival of illegal migrants in this country that precipitated the 'securitisation' policy of the 1980s and later continued as deemed necessary. To the general public, 'migrant' has a more specific connotation: they tend to view migrants as foreign workers, legal or illegal, asylum seekers and refugees. A number of foreigners especially from Indonesia, who came to work in Malaysia as early as 1960s or 1970s have acquired permanent resident status or married local women and have been well integrated into local society. Debates and policies on migrants in Malaysia have been largely focused on groups consisting of foreign workers (low-skilled), asylum seekers and refugees.

## **MALAYSIA AS A DESTINATION OF CHOICE**

Human migration has taken place throughout history and has at times been considered as a threat, but more often as an opportunity (Wohlfeld, 2014). Since 1980s, Malaysia underwent rapid economic development and industrialisation that contributed to peace, stability and prosperity in the midst of a region beset by conflicts, political instability and underdevelopment. By the 1990s, Malaysia has established itself as a country of peace with economic opportunities, thus encouraging a greater flow of migrants. According to statistics, in 2015, there were about 2.24 million legal foreign workers in Malaysia. Out of this, the highest (39%) came from Indonesia, followed by Nepal (25%) and Bangladesh (12%). (Azizah, 2015). Other source countries include the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam,

Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Cambodia. Out of the 15 countries that have been cited as countries of origin of these migrant workers, nine countries are cited as top supplier of house maids. They are (in order of importance) Indonesia, Philippines, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, India, Thailand, Nepal and Laos. (ILMIA, 2014) Most recent refugees came from Myanmar where political situation forced them to seek better life elsewhere.

There are many contributing factors that made Malaysia an attraction for many of these migrants. For Indonesians, geographical proximity, cultural, social and linguistic affinities made Malaysia a logical choice. Moreover, the two countries have close relations that facilitated interactions between their citizens. But it can be said that economic factor has been the main drive for migrants from all countries to come to Malaysia. They are to be found mostly in designated job sectors such as manufacturing, construction, plantation, agriculture, housemaids and service sectors. However, there are others who are found working in other sectors that are not permitted or in 'dubious' sector such as sex trade.

Malaysia might not top the list of being the 'happiest countries in the world'. However, for many of the migrants who chose to come to Malaysia, the prospect of finding jobs and earning better wages than in their countries of origin are the major pull factors. As more and more Malaysian women entered the work force, there was an increase in the demand for house helpers (maids). As Malaysia has not yet developed an affordable and reliable social support system such as nurseries or kindergartens in workplaces, working mothers are forced to look for maids to take care of their children while they are at work. This contributed to an increase in the trend of hiring maids, mostly from Indonesia. They are fondly referred to as 'bibik' by the children, and in general, they are able to integrate well into Malay families because of similarities in culture, language and social habits<sup>2</sup>.

For Indonesian migrants, the decision to come to Malaysia is not just on economic reason. As mention above, the social and cultural affinities facilitated their venture here. Many of them especially those who came with the earlier 'wave' of economic migrants, have stayed on and managed to build social networks that helped them to integrate into local community. Their presence and success encouraged others from the same village or areas in Indonesia to come to Malaysia to work, either legally or illegally. Today, many areas in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur are inhabited by Indonesian settlers of the old wave of migrants

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<sup>2</sup> One of the results of this close association with Indonesian maids was the ease with which some young Malay children began to acquire Indonesian accent when speaking Malay.

as well as the recent arrivals. Economic opportunities enhanced by the social networks intertwined to make Malaysia a convenient country for them to stay and work. These social ties are important beyond the high salaries they might receive in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere outside Malaysia. Moreover, the costs of travel between the two countries are affordable, especially with the proliferation of low-cost carriers facilitating such travel. Despite some stories of unfortunate Indonesian maids who have been mistreated by Malaysian employers, there are more untold stories of mutual acceptance and understanding among Malaysian employers and their Indonesian maids. It has become a common practise among many Malay Muslim families in Malaysia to pay for the tickets of their maids (usually with accompanying goodies) to Indonesia for *Hari Raya festivals*.

The peace, economic prosperity and the open multi-ethnic, multi-religious society of Malaysia are among the factors that attracted migrants to this country. They are also factors that facilitated their adaptation into their new surroundings. One of the best times to witness this is on Fridays and Sundays. On Fridays, one can see long lines of Bangladeshi, Indonesians, Pakistanis and local Malays making their way to the mosques for Friday prayer. On Sundays, one would find large congregation of Filipinos and other migrants who are Christians gathering at churches in cities like Petaling Jaya and Kuala Lumpur. For the Rohingyas, to be able to congregate for Friday prayer openly without fear is a blessing. A local teacher in Kampung Lembah, Hulu Langat district observed that the Rohingyas have become devout Muslims because of the newly founded joy and freedom of practicing their religion in this country. Many of them are also found to be doing the 3D jobs to support their living (Cikgu Azman, personal communication, October 10, 2015). A survey made a few years ago showed that an overwhelming majority of the Rohingyas wanted to continue to stay in Malaysia because here they are free to practice their religion and live in peace, in contrast to their country of origin (Ruhanas, 2015). They have adapted quite well to their new surroundings, despite the many difficulties they face because of their unclear status. Malaysia is not signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees and 1962 New York Protocol; as such it does not recognise these people as refugees and has no obligation to provide them protection. However, out of humanitarian reasons, Malaysia has allowed them to stay temporarily in the country while waiting for UHNCR to resolve their problems<sup>3</sup>. So, even though theoretically they are not allowed to work, many are found doing odd jobs, including the 3D jobs.

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<sup>3</sup> Malaysia had experience in handling the Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s who were given temporary shelter in designated places in the country while waiting to be sent to a third country.

## **SECURITISATION OF MIGRANTS IN MALAYSIA: MOTIVES AND IMPACT**

In the 20th century, it is observed that the trend of migration tend to take place from other parts of the world towards Europe, where it became associated with the notion of a security challenge or threat. In the late 1980s through to the 1990s, the issue of migrants in Malaysia was mainly perceived in terms of 'securitization'. Numerous debates have emerged to explain the relationship between migrants and security. Security was framed not only in terms of public safety, but also in terms of state security in all-compassing notion of national security. I have argued elsewhere that Malaysians are in general relaxed about security, so why is it that since the end of 1980s, the perception of threat from migrants dominated security thinking in Malaysia? (Ruhanas, 2009). An overview of the situation then may offer some justifiable explanation.

As mentioned above, since the 1980s, Malaysia underwent rapid industrialisation that attracted an unprecedented large number of migrant workers. Their presence in such a large number was unexpected and many were taken by surprise at this. The general public and the authorities, in all honesty, were not ready to accommodate such a large presence, especially of illegal migrants. As they became more and more visible in local communities and involved in undesirable activities, the Malaysian government, out of genuine concern for security and a growing public pressure, had to take the necessary actions. Many operations were launched to deter the arrival of illegal migrants. The deployment of the Malaysian Armed Forces was an evident of the seriousness of this threat. One of these actions was the 'ops' (security operations involving security agencies such as police and military) to deal with illegal migrants. These operations consisted of checks and if necessary raids by the police in areas where illegal migrants were believed to be staying. They resulted in the capture of many illegal migrants who were then deported or detained at immigration detention centres in Malaysia. Many outside observers who had little inkling of the complexity of security issues in Malaysia deemed this as 'violation of workers' rights and political persecution by the Malaysian government.

Politics and politicisation of the issue aside, there was a genuine security problem, especially in Sabah and in the Klang Valley where many of the crimes were attributed to foreign workers, especially Indonesians. There was a genuine worry by the public about the security in the areas where they lived in. One of the residents in Bandar Baru Bangi, a middle class and relatively rich area in the district of Hulu Langat, Selangor said that one of the reasons is 'sakit hati' or resentment coupled with unhappiness on the part of migrants at the contradictions they saw around them. Malaysians were seen as 'berada' (rich) and living in

comfort whereas migrants, especially Indonesian construction workers lived in squalid conditions of 'rumah kongsi', many lacking in basic facilities (Nik Mohd. Zafir Anuar, personal communication, March 12, 2016) Local residents became targets of robbery and violent crimes committed by these migrants who resented the gap between them and the Malaysians. The resentment and feeling of 'inferiority' are more felt among Indonesians because they speak the same language, have similar cultural and social norms, but separated by economic status and social position. Malaysians too felt apprehensive about Indonesians as they became more emboldened in their criminal activities. Although this was the action of only a minority, it tainted the image of Indonesian migrants and reinforced their image as a violent group of people. This did not happen among other migrant workers such as those from Bangladesh, Nepal or Vietnam. Could this be a case of familiarity breeds contempt?

Statistics do not always reflect the level of insecurity among the public. In the early millennium, police statistics revealed that less than 10% of the total crime cases nation-wide were committed by foreigners. Some have interpreted this to be that there is no truth in the assertion that the influx of foreign workers is the main culprit of the increase in crime rates in the country. Small though that percentage might be, it has generated a 'multiple' psychologically fear among Malaysians that they lived in an insecure environment. A number of localities such as in Bandar Baru Bangi, Sg Merab and Kajang areas experienced robberies known to be committed by Indonesians. These happened too frequently for comfort, especially during festive seasons such as Hari Raya or Chinese New Year. What irked residents were that sometimes these criminal acts were committed by Indonesians with whom they were familiar with through hiring them to do odd jobs. Residents resorted to vigilante corps patrol in addition to hiring professional guards to secure their residential areas. Such unfortunate experiences generated suspicion of local residents towards Indonesians especially towards the newly arrived migrants. The issue of securitisation was "deep in the minds of Malaysia" and at that time was due to the exposure, mainly by the media which reported extensively on such issues as violent crimes. Every day, Malaysians are increasingly made aware through the media that violent crime is on the rise. The fear is also related to the perception during that time that "psychologically, the public satisfaction with the government's effort to protect the public is declining."(Reizal, 2010).

Another dissatisfaction among the Malaysian public with regards to crimes committed by migrant workers was the lack of response from the Malaysian authorities to counter the negative actions of the Indonesian press and public about Malaysian treatment of migrants. There was no attempt to explain that

some of these Indonesians were charged for drug trafficking which may carry heavy penalty under Malaysian law and not because they were migrants. Such confusion or ignorance contributed to reinforcing the idea of an unjust and negative treatment of migrants in Malaysia. More important, such situations created a sense of helplessness felt by many Malaysians that even their government could not do anything to protect them and their dignity.

What appeared to be a normal process in deterring migrants from illegally entering the country has been misinterpreted or consciously manipulated by several groups in Indonesia. In 2002, when the Malaysian government launched an operation to deport illegal Indonesians back to Indonesia, it received strong protest in Indonesia. An Indonesian group calling themselves '*Laskar Merah Putih*' protested in front of the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta, burning the country's flag and threatened to harm Malaysians they found in the streets. Some Indonesian lawmakers and politicians also joined in the condemnation of the Malaysian government action and provocatively recalled the *konfrontasi* (Reizal, 2010). In the subsequent years that followed, more and more protests by Indonesians in front of the Malaysian embassy in Jakarta took place. But luckily enough, on the Malaysian side, the public and the authorities did not respond to these provocations saying they did not want to jeopardise the good relations between Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur.

## **MALAYSIAN NEGATIVITY OR A CASE OF DEFLECTION?**

The impact of these criminal activities coupled with the state's efforts to control them was the rise of negative perception on migrants, especially with regards to Indonesian migrants. But this negative perception was and remains limited to security related problem, and not towards migrants in general. The so-called Malaysian negativity on migrants was not widespread as alleged by some. A member of the Malaysian Employers Federation asserted that "Malaysians have wide spread negative perception towards migrants, and that despite the fact that they usually contribute positively to our country, there is still uneasiness among some Malaysians on the presence of foreign workers" (Teh, 2015)<sup>4</sup>. He went on to say that "in many circumstances, the mere mention of migrant workers is usually greeted with a smirk and negativity"<sup>5</sup>. Comments such as this can be misleading for several reasons. Malaysians on the whole recognised the need for migrant workers and their economic contribution to the country's development, and

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<sup>4</sup> Datuk Shamsuddin Bardan is the executive Director of Malaysian Employers Federation.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



acknowledged that there are certain jobs which do not interest them for economic or social reasons which could be done by migrants. However, such attitude is not necessarily accompanied by looking down upon them as both sides have mutual needs and interest to safeguard.

However, it cannot be denied that there exists among Malaysians certain unhappiness and resentment at employers because of their preference for employing migrant workers. This kind of resentment in some cases was translated into unkind remarks about migrants to spite those who employed them. One of the spins was to spread the image of migrant as 'dirty' 'unreliable' and 'cheats'. In Indonesia, many have been made to believe the appellation of "Indon" to refer to Indonesian migrants in Malaysia was an officially sanctioned policy designed to humiliate them. What is interesting is that even some Indonesian migrants themselves refer to their own community here as "Indon", and they did not find this offensive. Today, such usage has gone out of fashion, and even if it were to be uttered, very few will take offense. On the whole, Malaysians have come to accept the presence of migrants as a necessity and do not show hostility towards migrants in a manner that happened in some countries in Europe. However, there might be some lingering feeling of insecurity vis-a-vis certain groups of migrants as a result of the securitisation efforts of the 1980s and 1990s to stem the influx of illegal migrants.

## **EVOLVING PERCEPTIONS AND EMERGING ISSUES**

While it is true to say that there might still be lingering effect of securitisation efforts of the 1980s and 1990s, the attitudes and perceptions towards migrants in Malaysia have evolved. Recent research has shown that the focus and preoccupation of both the public and authorities have moved beyond security. Contrary to some assertions that Malaysians have negative attitude towards migrants, it is found that they have a tolerance for migrants, out of necessity and also as a result of many years of exposure to migrants and related issues. This is reflected not only in the official policy and media reporting, but also in the greater interactions between locals and migrants in daily lives. There is a consensus that if migrants are here to stay, then efforts towards how best to manage their presence and integration into the local surroundings must be considered. As economics became a prime mover in society, the presence of migrants in the country is increasingly viewed in economic, social and cultural perspectives.

The changing attitude and perceptions towards migrants in Malaysia can also be linked to the optimism about the nation's security in general. Police statistics showed that crime rates have gone down and there have been fewer reports

in media about crimes attributed to migrants. One might be permitted to think that the improved general security is a result of the success in government's securitisation efforts of the earlier period. These operations have to a certain extent reduced the security threat posed by illegal migrants. In many areas, today as many migrants have integrated well into the local community, creating a more secure and friendly environment, desirable for both migrant and locals. NGOs have also played an important role in bringing to light the conditions of migrant workers in the country, even though some exaggerated the situation for their own purposes. Of late, there are many NGOs who worked hand in hand with the authorities and the public to improve the living conditions of migrants in this country. Thus as the public became more 'enlightened' or educated on issues related to migrants, the negative impact of securitisation and politicisation of migrants became reduced. The idea of humanitarian assistance has also crept in, making it possible to look at migrants in a more generous and kinder ways.

Today the government and the public in Malaysia are more cognizant of what may be described as post-securitisation issues with regards to migrants. One of the issues that emerged is that of housing. The presence of large number of migrants gave rise to a bigger demand for housing. Although some employers are obliged by law to provide their workers with housing facilities, there are sectors where employers are not obliged to do, thus leading to a 'scramble' for accommodation among migrants. Even where companies or employers provide housing facilities to their workers, there is still demand for accommodation, especially in urban and sub-urban areas. The situation also provides an economic opportunity for Malaysians: they can rent out their premises to migrants, quite often at a higher price than if they were to lease it to locals. Sometimes there are complaints from locals about the undesirable environment (dirty, noisy) in areas where there is a high concentration of migrants. But this has not led to open hostility towards them. Places such as 'pasar malam' (night markets), food stalls and mosques continue to be a focal points of interactions between them.

Another issue that has been made aware to migrants and locals alike is the exploitation by employment agencies and employers who ignored official laws to safeguard workers' interests. Recruitment agencies incur the exasperation of both migrants and the public alike because of the tendency to profit from them. Suggestions have been made that the government should abolish these private recruitment agencies, instead work on government to government (G to G) basis. The high fee charged by these agencies is beyond the affordability of many average Malaysian households<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Some recruitment agencies for procuring maids could charge as high as RM13, 000.00 for locals to procure a maid.

The cost of hiring maids for example will be borne both by the perspective employer and the maid whose salary will be deducted until the debt is paid off.

Efforts towards better migrant management have also been initiated by the Malaysian government and governments of countries concerned. Towards this end, the governments of Malaysia and Indonesia signed in 2006, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia. It was agreed that migrant workers will have the right to mandatory one day rest per week, not allowing employers to withhold worker's international passports, remedies to report and act on worker's abuse and many others that would, if followed, help secure the well-being of migrant workers. Even before the signing of this MoU, migrant workers had access to medical facilities in government hospitals in Malaysia. In 2007, SUHAKAM noted that in Sabah from 2001 to 2006, between 6% to 8% of outpatient facilities and 11% to 14.5% of hospital beds were used by non-citizens. In some areas near Kuala Lumpur, migrants' children, especially Indonesians go to local schools alongside local ones. As a government servant commented, such health care and social responsibility is drawing on the resources of the state, but out of humanitarian reasons, this service continues to be extended (Reizal, 2010).

Another challenge in the management of migrants in Malaysia would be the issue of how best to help them to integrate culturally and socially within the local community. In France and Germany, migrants are usually given language training in French or German and familiarisation programmes aimed to prepare them for work and life in these countries. Eventually, for migrants' children, such programme would help them to enter schools. Indonesian migrants are known to be able to adapt better and faster than other groups of migrants because of the similarity and familiarity with local language and culture<sup>7</sup>. While efforts are being done to better manage migrant issues, there are still many challenges to its successful conclusion. In the past, one of the problems cited was the lack of resources to provide security and social infrastructure to cope with the influx of migrants. There have also been accusations of corruptions and inefficiency levelled against some public officials and meddling by politicians in the management of migrants. However, it must also be recognised that there are certain conditions which are beyond the control of Malaysia, such as the unpredictability of the causes that may pushed these migrants to flee their countries. Furthermore, discussions on migrants have not been entirely free from politicisation and manipulation of facts by some for their own interest. This can only serve to derail the focus on issues that matter most to the interests of migrants and the public in Malaysia.

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<sup>7</sup> A story has been circulated of a strange case of a Nepali life guard at a condominium swimming pool who does not speak Malay or English which created concern among residents about his ability to effectively discharge his duty in case of need.

## CONCLUSION

In the world of nation-states, ensuring sovereignty and security remains the primary aims of the government. In the late 1980s and 1990s, it was fashionable to frame the issue of migrant within the context of security. In Malaysia today, focus on securitisation of migrants has taken a low profile and overtaken by other issues related to the presence of migrants. The understanding of national security has been broadened to encompass the socio-economic and cultural dimensions. Issues such as economic, social, cultural impact and integration of these migrants have become the focus of many debates and policy orientation. While the management of migrants in Malaysia is far from perfect, the experience in dealing with them since the 1980s has given the authorities and others involved, the relevant exposure to migrant related issues. An efficient and proper migrant management will not only contribute to the economic development of the country, but also will enable the nation to cope better with the challenges of globalization of which migration has become a fixture.

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