

Migration and Security: Political, Social and Economic Contexts of Migration

Amarjit Kaur

School of Business, Economics and Public Policy
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2351
Australia
Email: akaur@une.edu.au

and

Ian Metcalfe

Earth Sciences/Geology & Asia Centre
School of Environmental and Rural Science
University of New England
Armidale NSW 2351
Australia
Email: imetcal2@une.edu.au

The current immigration debate in labour-importing countries such as Malaysia centres largely on whether migrants are an asset or a threat. On the one hand, migrant labour is an important economic asset in meeting labour shortages, keeping down labour costs and providing a range of skills not available locally. On the other, there are concerns that migrants put pressure on health and educational services and affect national security. It is also increasingly evident that many people move in disregard of the borders that delineate nations because they aspire to achieve a better life. This movement is perceived to undermine national structures since some migrants operate outside official channels and it is thus in local situations and contexts that the impact of migration is experienced, debated, and contested most directly. The current debate suggests that Southeast Asia is facing an important change of direction due to migration contributing to the reinvention and reconstruction of increasingly impenetrable borders.

With the aim of contributing to this ongoing debate in Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region, the Malaysia and Singapore Society of Australia addressed these and other issues at its Fourteenth Colloquium in December 2006. The Colloquium theme – *Boundaries and Shifting Sovereignties: Migration, Security and Regional Cooperation In Asia*– was tackled from a variety of perspectives. Seven papers from the interdisciplinary colloquium were selected for this special issue and provide new insights into the debates around migration and security in the region.

In this volume we first examine migration issues focussing on state and societal perceptions towards migrant workers in Malaysia, the migration-trafficking-refugee nexus and the role of the Jesuit Refugee Service, a faith-based organisation that works with refugee groups in the Asia-Pacific. Second, in the context of rethinking about borders, we examine the key issue of security and how Malaysia in particular deals with regional security issues and conflict at its borders with Thailand and the Philippines. The question of suicide bombers in Indonesia is also considered in the wider context of national and regional security.

Amarjit Kaur's paper addresses the exponential growth of migrant labour in Malaysia as a key component of Malaysia's developmental policy and traces recent policy shifts in foreign labour recruitment. She examines the differential treatment accorded to professionals and highly skilled workers employed under the 'expatriate worker' regime compared to the less-skilled workers recruited under the guest-worker program. She also investigates the ways in which the Malaysian state is reconstructing its national and economic borders and has identified undocumented migrants as the 'enemy within'. In the process, nation-state sovereignty has become equated with border inviolability

and the border has become increasingly impenetrable. The border is thus seen as an important force by the Malaysian government in shaping effective governance of labour migration, determination of periodic amnesties, detention and deportation programs, and responses to refugee crises in the region.

In their paper, Faizal Yahya and Arunajeet Kaur show that recent significant shifts in the Asia-Pacific region, notably the rapid and sustained growth of China and India, has effectively eroded the cost competitiveness of the ASEAN economies. They also consider how the sustained and high rates of economic growth in India have accompanied the creation of an unprecedented pool of human capital. They then examine the flow of talented human capital from India to Southeast Asia using Malaysia as a case study. They further argue that Malaysia is experiencing a shortage of knowledge workers to transform the Malaysian economy into a modern knowledge based economy, and that more foreign human capital will be required. Their key concern is that political and bureaucratic issues presently limit Malaysia's capacity to effectively recruit foreign human capital.

Denis Wright in his paper analyses recently published evidence and debate on the nexus between forced labour and migration, particularly the relationships between trafficking, migration, globalisation, and the forced labour of women in South Asia. He reviews interpretative approaches to trafficking and the impact of globalisation on female migration from South Asian countries, and consequent changes in the nature of employment of women in the region. He addresses the limitations of legislative attempts to eradicate trafficking and the need for more effective enforcement of existing laws, complemented by the cultural empowerment of women often subjected to entrenched legal and gender discrimination.

David Holdcroft takes us to Australia, which may usefully be understood as an immigrant society with its own type of frontier outlook, and its policy towards refugee movements. He examines the ways in which Australian refugee policy was developed as a subset of post-war immigration considerations and as such was influenced by the country's need to increase its population and at the same time to broaden its industrial base for reasons of security and economics. Such economic and political drivers continue to influence policy, meshing humanitarian objectives with immigration outcomes. He also considers the changes in the causes of forced displacement in the East Asian region that have given rise to large urban-based groups of undocumented people lacking access to status-determination processes and the protection accorded to 'status refugees'. He notes that policy development in nations such as Australia has largely ignored this new vulnerable group but continues to rely on encampment strategies while simultaneously publicly promoting a stereotype of the refugee as victim. The challenge lies in the re-imagining of the term 'refugee' and the adoption of strategies of complementary protection to reflect these changes.

Moving on to security issues, John Funston investigates how the resumption of violence in Thailand's south has alarmed neighbouring Malaysia. Separated from other Malay states by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909, the predominantly Malay/Muslim provinces share ethnic, cultural and religious ties with states in northern Malaysia. These provinces have a long history of conflict with the Thai-Buddhist governments in Bangkok, at times with the support of governments in Malaysia. He considers how this conflict eased in the 1980s and 1990s as Thai governments adopted more accommodating policies. Moreover, the 1989 surrender of the Communist Party of Malaya (which had retreated to Thailand's southern provinces) also removed a bilateral irritant and made Malaysia more willing to assist with Thai security concerns. Nonetheless the Thaksin government remained suspicious of Malaysia after violence resumed in late 2001, accusing it of supporting or providing a refuge for insurgents. He concludes that vitriolic exchanges between the two countries have, however, limited bilateral cooperation.

In her paper, Rita Camilleri explores the ways in which armed conflict between Muslim minorities and the state in the Philippines and Thailand present Malaysia with ongoing diplomatic challenges. She examines Malaysian responses to the Moro rebellion in the Southern Philippines since 2001 and the repression of Muslim minorities in southern Thailand since 2004. Malaysia's response to these challenges has often been multifaceted due to cultural, linguistic and religious affinities with

Muslim minorities on one hand, and its avowed policy of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries in ASEAN on the other. She notes that tensions may still be discerned in Malaysia's responses to demands for Muslim autonomy in southern Thailand and its diplomatic, educational and economic initiatives aimed at quelling separatist conflict in the region.

Zifirdaus Adnan examines how terrorist activity in Indonesia created shockwaves in the Asia-Pacific, particularly in Australia, since it impacted on the lives of many Australians. He addresses questions that have become a central concern for most individuals. How do people who get involved with terrorist groups progress in them and commit terrorist attacks? Why do some members eventually disengage from terrorist activities? Answers to these questions may provide useful information for policy makers who want to discourage people from joining terrorist groups, as well as encouraging such people to disengage from terrorism, so that the spread of terrorism can be reduced. He explores these issues through the story of Ali Imron, an Indonesian bomber who has since renounced terrorism, using what he calls 'the Process Model' proposed by Horgan (2005).