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To cite this article: Amarjit Kaur (2010) Labour migration trends and policy challenges in Southeast Asia, *Policy and Society*, 29:4, 385-397

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2010.09.001>



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Published online: 03 Mar 2017.



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Labour migration trends and policy challenges in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Labour migration in Southeast Asia since the 1970s and 1980s must be understood as an integral part of the post-colonial new geographies of migration. The scope and scale of transnational movements have grown rapidly and major states like Malaysia and Thailand between them currently host about 70 per cent of the estimated 13.5 million migrant workers in the region. Singapore's foreign labour force accounts for 25 per cent of the country's workforce. Two phenomena characterize these labour movements. Like labour-importing Western democracies, the major Southeast Asian labour-importing countries rely on the guest worker program to solve their labour shortage problems. They regulate immigration through elaborate administrative frameworks that are focussed on border control while brokerage firms and labour recruiters carry out recruitment, transportation and placement of migrant workers. These countries' immigration policies also often provide incentives for skilled workers, boost circular migration flows among low-skilled workers, and include severe penalties for unauthorised migrants. Additionally, comparisons between these countries point to patterns of convergence among them.

This paper explores migration trends in the post-colonial geography of migration against the backdrop of growing regionalism and the development of regional migration systems and migration corridors. It also examines the "new world domestic order" and the development of gendered migration linkages that have resulted in the expansion of the domestic work sector and care-giving migration.

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Keywords: Labour migration; Guest worker programs; Care-giving migration; Labour protections; Southeast Asia

1. Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Southeast Asia was one of two main destinations of mass proletarian movements from India and China. These labour movements were a defining feature of Asian globalisation, linking Empire and colonies and the complex exchanges and opportunities associated with the global trade in commodities. Wars and major economic changes resulted in reduced transnational movements in the 1930s and 1940s as colonial governments established border control regimes and introduced legislation to restrict Chinese and Indian immigration in the colonies. Subsequently, decolonisation and the emergence of nation states after the Second World War led to further restrictions on migration, and by the 1960s low-skilled labour migration had effectively been curbed (Kaur, 2006, chap. 3).

In the 1970s and 1980s the major newly industrializing countries of Southeast Asia – Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand adopted export-oriented industrialization strategies associated with the global redistribution and relocation of manufacturing production and the establishment of branch plants in the region. They soon experienced labour

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shortages and turned to the region's more populous nations to fill gaps in their workforces. Labour migration subsequently developed into a structural feature of their economies, persisting beyond cyclical fluctuations in labour supply (Athukorala & Manning, 1999). These states also developed strategies to monitor and control the migrant labour flows and temporary labour migration subsequently entered a new phase in Southeast Asian labour history, resuming its role in the region's geopolitics. This new migration is also best understood against the backdrop of growing regionalism and the development of regional migration systems and migration corridors. A comparative analysis of Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand's immigration policies, institutional structures and governance of migration shows patterns of convergence among these countries. These countries' labour policies also reveal underlying issues of gender, ethnicity and a racialised hierarchy of foreign worker recruitment. The limited protections for migrant workers has further transformed the political economy of labour migration and led to civil society and non-governmental organizations undertaking political mobilization in the name of migrant workers in the region.

2. Southeast Asian contexts of international labour migration (ILM) and migration trends

Contemporary labour migration in Southeast Asia developed in the 1960s and expanded in the 1970s and 1980s. Following the oil shocks of the 1970s, the oil-rich Gulf countries established major construction and development projects that drew considerable numbers of migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia. Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia saw this opportunity as an economic lifeline and started overseas labour deployment programs to benefit from the employment opportunities in the Middle East. Subsequently, Singapore and Malaysia also experienced labour shortages and became attractive destinations for regional temporary labour movements (Thailand became a net labour importer in the 1990s). The growing political and economic interconnectedness within and between states in the region particularly after the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian States (ASEAN) also promoted individual personal mobility. Specifically, as economic and demographic disparities between states became more obvious, the local geographical and regional contexts assumed greater importance in shaping and facilitating cross-border labour flows in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia is typically regarded as one labour migration system within the migration systems framework. Two groupings of states, based on their specific migratory characteristics, i.e. mainly emigration and mainly immigration, have been identified in this system. The Philippines, Cambodia, Burma, Lao PDR, Viet Nam, and Indonesia are in the first group while Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia and Thailand are in the second. Moreover, two principal migration corridors have been documented – the archipelagic ASEAN corridor and the Mekong sub-regional corridor. In the first, Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei are the major destination countries, importing workers largely from Indonesia and the Philippines. In the second, Thailand is the main destination for migrant workers from countries through which the Mekong River flows, specifically, Burma, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam. Concomitantly, the establishment of growth triangles or sub-regions in ASEAN, planned to facilitate trade, capital and labour flows, have resulted in three sub-systems. These sub-systems are the Sijori Growth Triangle (a partnership arrangement between Singapore, Johor in Malaysia and Riau in Indonesia); the Brunei–Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines East ASEAN growth area (BIMP-EAGA); and the Northern ASEAN sub-region comprising Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand (Battistella & Asis, 2003, pp. 4–9).

All these sub-regions point to the existence of distinct transit points rooted in geographical proximity and shared histories. Border zones too have become important channels in various cross-border economic corridors, belts and transnational agreements. Serial migration flows, whereby outflows of workers from one country are offset by complementary inflows from other sources within the region, are routine.

Migration movements and the experiences of migrant workers diverge considerably and correlate with immigration policies, economic sectors and gender. Hence the differing contractual, legal and personal situations indicate that workers encounter diverse methods of control/exploitation by the state and employers in the destination countries. Significantly, the World Bank's emphasis on the migration-development nexus has resulted in labour-sending states introducing policies and institutions for their nationals since workers' remittances are critical to national and household economies. Labour officials are now routinely stationed at consular offices in destination countries to provide protection for their nationals and reduce the 'risks' of migration. Moreover, new global governance norms, 'frameworks' and 'approaches' as well as best practice examples outlined in the United Nations' Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are being used as guidelines by civil society, faith-based groups and non-governmental organizations to promote labour and human rights.

The new geography of migration in Southeast Asia is a corollary of the liberalisation of markets, specifically the growing flexibilisation of labour markets, and has three characteristic features. First, guest worker programs or temporary contract employment (particularly for low skilled workers) dominate ILM. The guest-worker programs incorporate short, fixed-term employment contracts with specific employers and repatriation upon completion of service. Professionals and high skilled migrants are often provided incentives such as promise of citizenship and allowed to have their families accompany them, a privilege not offered to low skilled workers. Second, labour-sending states are actively involved in promoting and organising labour emigration through government to government agreements, such as Memoranda of Understanding (MOU), with labour-destination countries to negotiate and implement transnational labour movements and oversee the operation of private recruitment agencies. The MOU lay down minimum work and labour standards and include certification of employees' eligibility and health conditions for the jobs. These MOU also provide flexibility to destination states to respond to changing economic conditions.

Third, the responsibility for recruitment, transportation and placement lies mainly with private recruitment agencies, intermediaries (including out-sourcing and brokerage firms) and a thriving migration industry. Various shortcomings in this policy method and the large profits involved both promote irregular migration and assist in the making of irregularity. Thus, despite the risks involved, human trafficking has increased noticeably in the region and provides people for sweatshop labour, domestic work, marriage and prostitution. Concurrently, governments of almost all labour-exporting countries are actively involved in both promoting labour emigration and in regulating the welfare of their nationals. Both Indonesia and the Philippines include targets for the number of workers they plan to send abroad in their economic development plans. These targets have increased over time and rose to 1.25 million workers in the 1994–99 economic development plan and 2.8 million in the 1999–2003 economic development plans (Kaur, 2004, chap. 9). In the Philippines there is also well-developed legislation on recruitment that is based on sound governmental structures to provide oversight over private recruitment firms.

Comparative economic indicators for Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand and their poorer labour-sending neighbours is listed in Table 1 below.

The direction of ILM flows in Southeast Asia is shown in Fig. 1 Map 1 below. Much of the migration is in the direction of the major NICs, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.

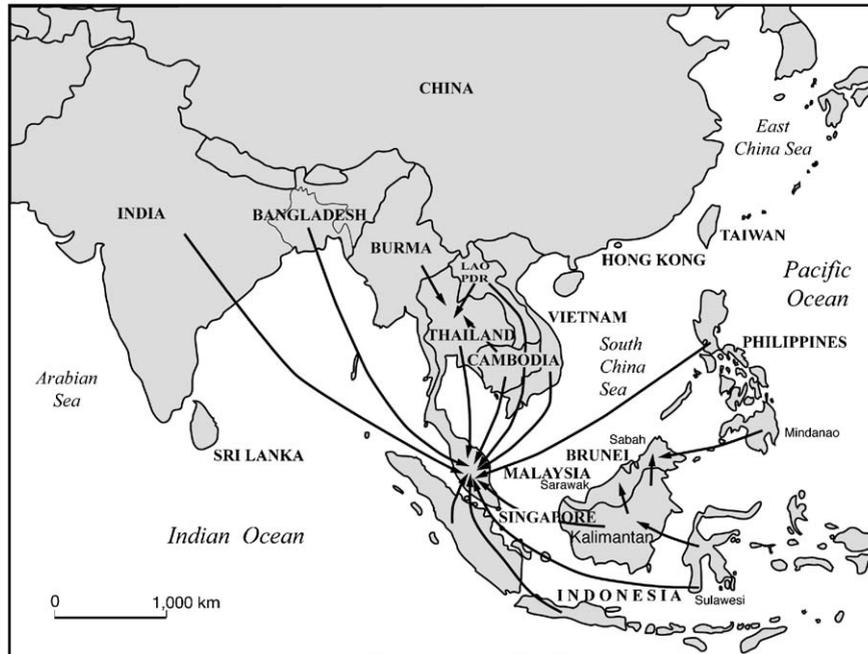
Broad estimates of the magnitude of ILM flows offer some interesting insights. In Singapore, immigration is a key policy strategy to maintain the country's economic health and is also compatible with its population policy. In 1990, for example, citizens comprised 86 per cent of the total population of 3 million people and this figure dropped to 64 per cent in 2009, in a total population of about 5 million (Economist, 14 November 2009). Foreign workers, who comprised 25 per cent of the labour force in 2004, currently make up about a third of the nearly 3 million strong labour force (Migration News, Vol. 17, no. 1, January 2010). Malaysia's labour force is approximately 12 million, and of this figure about 3 million are migrant workers but only about 2.2 million are authorized workers. In Thailand there were

Table 1
Southeast Asian migration corridor: main economic indicators.

Country	per Capita GDP (a) (current international) (US\$)	Human development index (b)	per Capita foreign direct investment (a) (US\$)	Unemployment (b) (% of total labour force)	% of population below poverty line (c)
Cambodia	2000.92	0.556	10.89	2%	35.9
Indonesia	3227.81	0.682	(–15.69)	6%	18.2
Malaysia	9130.40	0.790	12.06	4%	7.5
Philippines	4171.06	0.751	14.58	10%	34.0
Singapore	24,006.40	0.884	339.26	3%	Ö
Thailand	7009.47	0.768	58.00	2%	9.8
Viet Nam	2304.78	0.688	16.35	n.a.	28.9

Sources: (a) United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Index 2001*; (b) World Bank, *World Development Indicators 2004* (figures from 2001); (c) Asian Development Bank, *Key Indicators 2004*, cited in Asian Development Bank, *Workers' Remittance Flows in Southeast Asia*, 2006, p. 3.

Notes: FDI = foreign direct investment, GDP = gross domestic product, HDI = human development index, n.a. = not available.



Map 1. Direction of labour migration flows in Southeast Asia since the 1990s.

Source: Adapted from Amarjit Kaur, *Wage labour in Southeast Asia since 1840: Globalisation, the international division of labour and labour transformations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 212.

about 1.8 million migrant workers at the end of 2008, but only about half a million were registered (Bangkok Post, 11 January 2009; Martin, 2007, p. 4).

3. Immigration policies and governance of labour migration in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand

The three major labour destination countries' immigration policies have broad similarities, but there are major differences as well, indicative of how adequately the policies have been integrated into the broader economic and social policy frameworks. Singapore stands at one end of the continuum. Since the state's guiding principle on migration is closely intertwined with the national population policy, its immigration policy consists of an elaborate arrangement of migrant levies (taxes or charges) on low-skilled workers and incentives for highly-skilled professionals. In Thailand, policies have been in place for the recruitment of professionals and skilled workers since 1978 (Numnak, 2005; Wongboonsin, 2006). However, there is no "concrete" policy for recruitment of voluntary, short term and cross border migrant labour, and these workers lead "perilous" lives in the country. Malaysia lies somewhere in between and has made significant policy shifts in recent years in response to labour market demand and also global migration governance "intervention" (Kaur, 2008, 2009).

3.1. Singapore

Singapore was a British colony prior to joining the Malaysian Federation in 1963. It was expelled from the Federation in 1965, effectively "lost" its wider domestic market, and made the switch to export-oriented industrialisation. By the late 1960s, the state faced a labour shortage and sanctioned the recruitment of migrant workers (initially from Malaysia) to alleviate the upward pressure on wages. The state also encouraged the entry of married women into the labour market to augment the workforce. An avenue for a very specific and voluntary, short-term female labour migration from (initially) the Southeast Asian region was thus created in the domestic work/care giving sphere in the absence of state-provided childcare facilities. The immigration framework has also progressively been modified to attract those with skilled qualifications, as well as business people and entrepreneurs.

Essentially, Singapore's immigration policy is intended at attaining the state's longer-term goals of industrial-upgrading and technological change on the one hand, and maintaining competitiveness in the shorter-term on the other (Manning & Bhatnagar, 2006, p. 60). The state launched a human capital investment strategy to develop its service sector by increasing the professional and skilled migrant intake. Concurrently, a nation-building strategy based on multiracialism to safeguard the rights of racial, linguistic and religious minorities in Singapore was also implemented (Chan, 1991, p. 159). As outlined in Singapore's *Manpower 21 Report* (which saw the Ministry of Labour renamed The Ministry of Manpower), augmentation of the national labour force with foreign labour is a key element in the country's economic plans and policies for the foreseeable future. The six core strategies listed include: Integrated Manpower Planning; Lifelong Learning for Lifelong Employability; Augmenting the Talent Pool; Transforming the Work Environment; Developing a Vibrant Manpower Industry; and Harnessing Collective Energies.

The deployment and management of foreign labour in Singapore is regulated through three major legislative instruments, namely the Immigration Act; the Employment of Foreign Workers' Act (under which is subsumed the Employment Agencies Act); and the Penal Code. The Immigration Act provides guidelines for law enforcement agencies to handle immigration violations and the exercise of prosecutorial discretion with respect to both employers and unauthorised migrant workers. The Employment of Foreign Workers' Act regulates the employment of migrant workers through an array of visas/employment passes, the work permit and foreign levy system. The Employment Agencies Act ensures that employment agencies do not charge job seekers more than the amount stipulated by the state while the Penal Code includes penalties for non-payment and the physical abuse of workers (Kaur, 2006).

The guest worker program for professionals and skilled migrants in Singapore includes the promise of permanent residency and provision for subsidised healthcare, dependents' education and housing incentives. The migrants are predominantly from Malaysia; Western developed countries such as United States, Australia and Britain; East Asia (mainly Japan and South Korea); and China and India (Yeoh, 2007). The proportion of workers in managerial, professional and technical occupations also rose from 11 per cent in 1970 to about 40 per cent in 1999 (Gaur, 2006, p. 195). Simultaneously, the state's policy for low-skilled workers rests on the premise that this group is hired on a transient basis: the intake is raised during periods of economic expansion and lowered during periods of contraction (see Stalker, 1997, p. 255). The state has also taken steps to reduce its dependence on low-skilled workers. Unlike Malaysia and Thailand, Singapore does not have a comparable agricultural sector and has moved up the production ladder in manufacturing. The low-skilled workers are concentrated mainly in manufacturing, construction (housing and infrastructure), the shipping industry and the lower paid service occupations including domestic work and care giving and other menial occupations. The current immigration framework has been progressively modified to attract those with higher qualifications, as well as business people and entrepreneurs.

The Employment of Foreign Workers Act 1990 is the major statute regulating the service conditions of migrant labour. The Employment Pass grants the best conditions and lowest charges to the professional and skilled migrant category. The pass deals with a range of occupations and is linked to salary levels and skills, as listed in Table 2 below.

While the P-pass is targeted at professionals/knowledge workers (with internal classification) the Q-pass is aimed at skilled workers. These workers may work in any sector of the economy; they are not subject to levies; and are allowed to apply for residency or citizenship. They are also permitted to have their families with them. In recent years a new category, the Personalized Employment Pass (PEP) for skilled independent migrant workers has been introduced, targeted at selected Employment Pass holders and foreign students from institutions of higher learning in Singapore.

Table 2
Singapore: employment pass P & Q eligibility summary.

Type	Eligibility
P1 Professional, managerial, executive, specialist jobs	Fixed monthly salary >\$7000
P2 Professional, managerial, executive, specialist jobs and recognized qualifications	Fixed monthly salary >\$3500
Q1 Recognized qualifications	Fixed monthly salary >\$2500
In lieu of recognized qualifications, other compensatory factors such as skills and years of experience may also be considered (recommended – minimum of five years relevant work experience)	

Source: http://www.mom.gov.sg/publish/momportal/en/communities/work_pass/employment_pass/about_the_pass.html.

The S pass (a new category of work pass that replaced the earlier Q2 pass) is targeted at foreigners with starting salaries of S\$1800 per month. Here too, applicants are assessed on a points system, based on multiple criteria including salary, educational qualifications (degree/diploma in a technical field), job type, and work experience (Kaur, 2007a).

By comparison, semi-skilled and less-skilled workers are recruited under the Work Permit (or 'R' pass), which also has internal classification: R1 is for foreign workers with a trade qualification while R2 is for other less-skilled workers, predominantly domestic workers. Both the S and R pass holders are subject to employment quotas ('dependency ceilings') and levies. The guest worker program for less-skilled workers enables the government to increase labour flexibility, trim certain industries of excess labour and bring in additional labour through lower levies when required (Kaur, 2007a). R pass holders may renew their permits for up to 4 years and are disallowed from having their families with them. Employers of low-skilled workers are also required to post a security bond.

Internal enforcement processes have thus enhanced Singapore's capacity to control levels of employment of guest workers by deterring workers from overstaying and preventing entry of unauthorised workers. These processes come from legislation passed in 1989 and specify prison sentences of up to three months and physical punishment (caning). The latter measure was subsequently extended to employers who employed more than five undocumented workers. The state has also mandated the provision of housing to workers by employers and depends on periodic amnesties to encourage existing visa over stayers to turn themselves in to the authorities for repatriation.

Singapore's main labour legislation applies to both skilled and low-skilled migrant workers, but domestic workers had no formalised work agreements or minimum work standards and much weaker protections. They also did not have specified working hours, nor did they have a weekly day off. Contracts often stipulate that a domestic worker is required to remain on the premises of her employer (unless on official duties or a day's leave). Domestic workers, who earn between S\$200 and S\$250 a month, are required to pay about S\$600, or three months' salary to recruitment agents to get employment contracts (Anggraeni, 2006; Kaur, 2007b; *Transient workers count too*, 2006). Pay scales also differ and are based on the nationality of the worker. Thus Filipino domestic workers, who speak English, are paid better than Indonesian or Sri Lankan domestic workers. Domestic workers are required to undergo mandatory pregnancy tests every six months and are deported if they become pregnant (they may however elect to have an abortion to avoid deportation). Low-skilled foreign workers (including domestic workers) also face additional restrictions in the form of limits to personal freedoms. Reunion of workers' dependents is prohibited, as is marriage to a Singapore national, without the prior permission of the Singapore government.

Human Rights Watch published a report in 2005 titled *Maid to Order: Ending Abuses Against Migrant Domestic Workers in Singapore*, detailing the abuse and lack of rights of Indonesian, Filipino and Sri Lankan domestic workers in Singapore. While the report acknowledged the positive steps taken by the Singapore government to provide some security for domestic workers, their exclusion from the *Employment Act* indicated that they had "different" protections compared to other workers, and this situation had increased their vulnerability and weakened their bargaining power (Human Rights Watch, 2005; Kaur, 2007b). The Singapore government does not sign recruitment/bilateral agreements with labour-sending states and prefers to fall back on the market economy.

Interestingly, the diverse foreign Asian skilled migrants' preference for their own nationals for domestic work in their homes has also led to domestic worker recruitment from new sources, such as India. Rising demand for domestic workers too has caused domestic worker recruitment agencies to expand. These agencies are very competitive, profits are small and they have passed on the recruitment, transportation, training and placement costs to the employers, who have to pay upfront fees for hiring domestic workers. The costs are equivalent to these workers' salaries for four months and thus workers are not paid for the same period. Employers also retain their employees' identification papers/passports, confined in their homes and strip them of personal freedoms. This is largely because employers are required to post a bond for their workers and are responsible for their whereabouts at all times (Kaur, 2007b; Yeoh, Huang, & Devasahayam, 2004).

In the past few years and amidst much bad publicity, Singapore introduced a standard employment contract for domestic workers to regulate their terms and employment conditions. The differential pay scales (set by market forces) that vary according to the nationality of the domestic worker persist and domestic workers still do not get a weekly day off. However, employers and workers may negotiate one to four days off per month or alternatively receive payment for the day(s). Human Rights Watch has cited Singapore in its most recent report on migrant domestic workers for its record in prosecuting "employers and recruiters who physically abused domestic workers" compared to Malaysia and the Gulf countries (Human Rights Watch, 2010, p. 4).

3.2. Malaysia

In terms of numbers, Malaysia is the largest employer of overseas migrant workers in Southeast Asia. It is also both an exporter and importer of labour. Moreover, within a relatively short period, 1987–1993, Malaysia was transformed from a net labour exporter to a labour importer. This transition was also very rapid. Additionally, unlike other countries in the Asian region such as Japan, Korea and Taiwan, the migration transition occurred long before Malaysia achieved full employment and when its GNP per capita was only about US \$1800 (Lim, 1996, p. 319, 327). Malaysia's dependence on migrant labour also occurred and is occurring against the background of a pro-natalist population policy and a domestic labour force growth rate of between 2 and 3 per cent. This domestic labour force growth rate was significantly higher than in most other Southeast Asian countries.

Most observers attribute the labour shortages to the New Economic Policy (NEP) implemented by the state in 1970, following the May 1969 race riots in the country (see Kaur, 2001, p. 165, 220–1). The two principal objectives of the NEP were the reduction and eventual eradication of poverty, irrespective of race, and the removal of the identification of race with economic function. The second objective primarily implied reducing the concentration of Malays in subsistence agriculture and increasing their employment in the modern rural and urban sectors of the economy. The state subsequently became highly interventionist and developmental and the government commenced vast development schemes and construction projects, corporatized agriculture, enlarged government bureaucracy, and created additional white-collar jobs for Malays. The NEP further coincided with the embracing of an export-oriented industrialisation strategy, creation of jobs in labour-intensive manufacturing production for export and the tightening up of the labour market (Kaur, 2004, chap. 8, 2006, chap. 3).

These race-based policies and legislation had major consequences for the Chinese and Indian Malaysians. First, there was a growing trend towards smaller families among them, partly in response to the reduction in their share of the economic cake. Second, those who had the means and education migrated overseas to countries like Singapore or Taiwan, in search of employment opportunities. In 1991, for example, an estimated 100,000 Malaysians, including professionals, were employed in Singapore. About 24,000 of them commuted daily across the causeway linking the two countries (Kaur, 2006, p. 43). Others went to Western countries such as Canada and Australia as permanent migrants.

According to a World Bank Study (1995, p. 58), 14 million jobs were created in Malaysia during the period 1987–93 alone, while the domestic labour force grew by only 3.9 per cent. Indonesian migrant workers were acknowledged as the preferred workers to fill the gap, owing to cultural, religious and linguistic similarities between the two countries. Subsequently thousands arrived in Malaysia to take up jobs in the plantation, construction and domestic work sectors. In 1984 Malaysia signed a bilateral agreement (the Medan Agreement) with Indonesia for a government-to government regulated supply of Indonesian workers for the plantation and domestic work sectors. In 1985 the Philippines and Malaysian governments also signed an agreement for the recruitment of Filipino domestic workers. Subsequently, in 1986 employers in the plantation and construction industries in Malaysia were permitted to recruit Bangladeshi and Thai workers for these sectors (Kaur, 2006, chap. 3). Unlike Singapore, Malaysia has MOU with these labour-sending countries, and changing labour market demands shaped, and continue to shape government migration goals and labour recruitment policies. Essentially, the Malaysian state has also alternated between tightening immigration controls and loosening them through bilateral agreements and/or amnesties to cope with the great flood of documented and undocumented workers into the country.

As in Singapore, the deployment and management of foreign labour is regulated through three major legislative instruments, namely the Immigration Act; the Employment of Foreign Workers' Act (under which is subsumed the Employment Agencies Act); and the Penal Code. Malaysia's guest worker programs for professionals/high skilled and low skilled migrant workers have some similarities with the programs developed in Singapore. However, Malaysia has problems reconciling its demand for transnational workers with its race-based preferential policies, Malay nationalism and quota system. It also has a distinctively diversified recruitment policy intended to lessen its dependence on any one country and has signed MOU with most labour-sending countries in Asia for the recruitment of low skilled workers (Kaur, 2005).

The government's preoccupation with ethnicity, nationality and gender also underscores its immigration governance structures for high skilled and low skilled migrant workers. High skilled workers (in professional and technical categories) are conceptualised as *pegawai dagang* or *expatriates* while low skilled workers are called *pekerja asing* or *foreign contract workers*. There are correspondingly two types of employment approval permits or work visas, namely an employment pass (*Pas Penggajian*) for expatriates; and a temporary work permit or visit pass (*Pas*

Lawatan Kerja Sementara) for low skilled workers, including domestic workers. Professionals and high skilled workers are also categorised according to their skills and payment circumstances (receipt of a monthly salary exceeding RM2500). The job contract was originally limited to two years (with a maximum term of five years). These workers may be employees or self-employed and are permitted to have their families accompany them. Expatriates are normally employed in multinational enterprises although an increasing percentage is employed in the computing, medical and engineering fields and also in the higher education and sports sectors (Kassim, 2005, p. 267). They have to be sponsored by their employers, the employment term is restricted and they are disallowed from obtaining citizenship through marriage with Malaysian citizens. They also lack a fast track to citizenship.

Low skilled migrant workers are recruited under the Work Permit/Visit Pass on one-year work permits (renewable up to five years) and their monthly salary is set below RM2500 (most earn under RM1000). They are employed in the manufacturing, construction, plantation, services and domestic work sectors. There are age restrictions and workers are disallowed from having their families with them (see below and Kaur, 2007b). The number of permits approved is regulated and dependent on the type of industry; export/non-export orientation; paid-up capital; sales value; and the ratio of local to foreign workers. A “dependency ceiling” is thus implicit for the firm’s workforce and is higher for sectors where low skilled workers are employed. The migrant workers’ country of origin is also considered and there are restrictions on the origin and number of workers from any one individual country in particular occupational sectors.

Indonesia is the main labour-sending country and the chief source of domestic and construction workers, as shown in Table 3 below. The Malaysian state’s diversified recruitment policy is also based on a racialised hierarchy and a preference for certain nationals. This policy enables the government to pit one labour exporter against another.

Generally, Malaysia’s weak governance structures have resulted in the marginalisation and vulnerability of low skilled migrant workers. These workers are also more likely to lose their legal status and their freedom to move freely in the country is restricted. The great number of ministries and government agencies involved in the recruitment process represents a major shortcoming in the country as do the labyrinth of jurisdictions. Thus poor inter-ministerial and departmental coordination make it almost impossible for guest workers to seek redress and justice. Consequently, migrant workers who need to remain in the country following unlawful termination of employment become “undocumented” and face incarceration and physical punishment. Employers retain their workers’ passports, thus increasing their vulnerability and facilitating their “capture” by Malaysia’s “deputised” voluntary neighbourhood corps, Relu. The irregular workers are then detained in detention camps pending their arraignment in immigration courts. As Ramachelvam (2008) notes, foreigners comprise 33 per cent of the prison population, despite the fact that they commit only 2 per cent of the crimes. The vast majority of them are incarcerated on immigration-related offences. Since immigration violations are considered civil matters, these workers may be imprisoned without any rights and any guarantee of a speedy trial.

Initially, Malaysia allowed employers to directly recruit workers from overseas (excepting domestic workers) if the employers required 50 or more workers. Since 2006 the government has encouraged outsourcing or labour hire firms to provide fewer than 50 workers to managers of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). The rise of these SMEs

Table 3
Malaysia: migrant workers by nationality and sector, November 2007.

Nationality	Domestic workers	Construction	Manufacturing	Services	Plantation	Agriculture	Total
Indonesia	296,984	210,838	206,898	40,116	267,615	102,629	1,155,080
Bangladesh	17	49,289	151,376	26,069	24,552	15,016	266,319
Nepal	30	4624	178,714	28,764	2810	8171	223,113
Burma	30	15,111	79,425	20,617	1483	6556	123,222
India	99	7577	30,803	60,750	23,298	21,631	144,158
Vietnam	10	5220	106,686	2826	90	623	115,464
Philippines	10,397	1686	2856	2765	5038	2581	25,323
Thailand	417	1105	790	15,216	63	555	18,056
Pakistan	1	4387	3296	1829	816	5080	15,409
Cambodia	6825	176	2404	231	201	86	9923
Others	893	2508	2857	3174	369	248	10,049
Total	315,703	302,440	766,105	202,357	356,335	163,176	2,106,116

Source: Malaysia, Department of Immigration, cited in Suaram, *Malaysia Human Rights Report 2007*, p. 155.

coincides with the push by multinationals such as Nike to use contract factories in Malaysia (and Thailand) to manufacture clothes and sports shoes that carry their brand names. Additionally, the migration of low-cost manufacturing industries to “cheaper” countries such as China and Bangladesh has caused the closure of some larger manufacturing units. Further, the growth of smaller “niche” agricultural farms employing less than 50 workers has also mushroomed, and these farms rely on migrant workers. In 2006 the Ministry of Home Affairs licensed 270 outsourcing firms to recruit mainly South Asian migrant workers (predominantly from Bangladesh) and these migrant workers “pay” for the privilege of recruitment. The outsourcing system has effectively become a brokerage system, whereby the labour hire firm has become the de facto employer. The labour hire firm, which is legally required to have specific jobs for the workers it brings in, now operates as a contractor/brokerage firm, moving workers around to get the best deal for itself.

In effect, the outsourcing system has transformed the workers it brings into the country into bonded labour (Fernandez, 2008; Ramachelvam, 2008), and horror stories of their exploitation have been reported in the media (see Associated News, 1 August 2008). The Malaysian Trades Union Congress has reported that the activities of these labour hire firms/agents “has worsened the problem of human trafficking” in Malaysia since they “bring in as many as 500 workers each’ who are then ‘sold’ or outsourced” (humantrafficking.org, News and Updates, 17 May 2007). There are currently 16 dedicated detention centres in Malaysia (11 in Peninsular Malaysia, 2 in Sarawak and 3 in Sabah) to house irregular or undocumented migrants. The geographical spread of the detention centres correlates with the entry points of migrant workers (particularly irregular workers). In 2008 it was reported that there were 11,900 detainees incarcerated in the country (Ramachelvam, 2008).

The Malaysian government’s lack of duty of care towards domestic workers was taken up by Human Rights Watch, resulting in the publication of a Report titled *Help Wanted: Abuses Against Female Migrant Domestic Workers in Indonesia and Malaysia* in 2004. This Report was extremely critical of both the Indonesian and Malaysian governments for not providing protections for Indonesian domestic workers. Following publication of the Report, the Malaysian Government initiated a number of changes in 2005 to provide certain safeguards for domestic workers. These included: a wage raise, new rules for payment commencing from the first month of their service (rather than the withholding of their salaries for the first six months which enabled domestic worker placement agencies to recover the agency fees), and rules allowing them to change employers. The minimum entry age for employment of domestic workers was also raised to 25 years (Human Rights Watch, 2004; Kanapathy, 2006).

Subsequently, in May 2006, Malaysia and Indonesia signed a MOU setting out a standard contract for Indonesian domestic workers in Malaysia. Although the pay scale was revised upwards, the withholding of salary continues, the domestic workers’ passports are withheld by employers, the issue of a wage increase has not been resolved and nor are employers willing to grant a weekly day off to domestic workers. Domestic workers in Malaysia are not paid for the first seven months to allow employers to recoup their recruitment costs, again due to the competition among domestic worker recruitment firms (personal interview). In June 2009 the Indonesian government imposed a ban on the recruitment of domestic workers by Malaysian employers, following a horrific abuse scandal and the situation remains unresolved. Although Malaysian officials argue that on average only 50 domestic worker abuse cases are reported annually, Indonesia claims that 1000 domestic workers experience violence and mistreatment annually in Malaysia (The Straits Times, 13 July 2009).

Malaysia’s governance arrangements for low skilled migrant workers are analogous to bonded labour conditions. Crucially, these arrangements are considered the worst in the region since they “support” mistreatment, exploitation, and denial of equal access to benefits and protection, harassment and persecution of migrant workers. The United States’ Department of State in its 2007 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report (US Department of State *Trafficking in Persons Report 2007*) placed Malaysia in Tier 3 for “not fully complying with the Trafficking Victims Protection Act’s minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and not making significant efforts to do so”. Thus Malaysia could face sanctions such as the withholding of non-humanitarian, non-trade related US aid. Moreover, following publication of the Report, the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations carried out its own investigations into allegations of trafficking and extortion of Burmese migrants in Malaysia and along the Malaysia–Thai border. Unsurprisingly, the Report, “Trafficking and Extortion of Burmese Migrants in Malaysia and Southern Thailand” (US Committee on Foreign Relations, 111th Congress Report, 3 April 2009) not only confirmed the trafficking and human rights abuses, but also alleged that Malaysian immigration officials, police and Rela personnel were involved in the trafficking trade (see also Tenaganita, 2008). Malaysia was again placed in Tier 3 in 2009 and has reportedly instituted new measures to combat human trafficking, including taking action against errant police and immigration officials.

In a sequel to this, Amnesty International carried out its own study of migrant workers' human rights violations in Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia) under its Demand Dignity campaign and launched its report on the migrant workers' situation in March 2010 titled, *Trapped: The Exploitation of Migrant Workers in Malaysia*. The study affirms that while individual recruitment agents perpetrate labour trafficking, the government of Malaysia facilitates this abuse due to its "loose regulation of agents, abusive labour laws and policies and the practice of allowing employers to confiscate their workers' passports" which allows trafficking of foreign workers to flourish. Amnesty International has also recommended that Malaysia set up a royal commission to look into the foreign workers' issue (Amnesty International, 2010).

3.3. Thailand

In Thailand internal migration from the rural to urban areas played an important role in the country's industrialisation program in the 1970s and 1980s. In the early 1980s too male Thai migrant workers went to the Middle East and Singapore, consistent with the state's policy of encouraging Thais to seek overseas employment. By the late 1980s, as labour costs in Bangkok and its environs rose, manufacturers pushed outwards to the northern areas bordering Burma, Cambodia and Lao PDR in search of cheaper labour to produce manufacturing and agricultural commodities for export. Concurrently, the Thai government supported the relocation of many labour-intensive manufacturing industries to Mae Sot in Tak Province across from Mywaddy in Burma, as part of its policy of "constructive engagement" with Burma. Additionally, continuing human rights violations in Burma led to most OECD countries imposing trade sanctions on Burma and this action also facilitated the shifting of many foreign-owned factories to Mae Sot. The predominantly garment and textile factories in Mae Sot have now become dependent on Burmese guest workers for "contract" manufacturing (Arnold & Hewison, 2006; Thornton, 2006).

Thailand also needed high skilled workers and had introduced policies for the recruitment of professional and skilled migrant labour in 1978. These workers or expatriates are recruited by firms that hold "priority" status, have the potential to attract foreign investment into the country, and come under two categories. The first category includes enterprises endorsed by the Board of Investment under its investment promotion and related legislation. The second category includes foreign corporations that provide managerial and professional services, or large companies under Thai ownership that require specialised skills. Most of the workers are from East Asia and Western countries and they are given either permanent residency status, non-immigrant visas or visas under the foreign investment legislation (Numnak, 2005; Wongboonsin, 2006).

By the 1990s Thailand thus became heavily dependent on low skilled migrant labour associated with the expanding production of manufacturing and agricultural commodities for export. Unlike Malaysia and Singapore it has not instituted a "legal" temporary employment channel for guest worker programs for low skilled workers. It relies instead on regularisations and annual registrations, which have become a tool for managing the migration of low skilled guest workers into the country. Starting in 1992, the government utilized Section 12 of the Foreign Employment Act of 1978 (which provides some latitude for the authorities to allow migrant workers to work on a temporary basis) to sanction these workers' employment in specific sectors. In effect, this system of registering low skilled migrant workers through annual cabinet resolutions is "primarily concerned with controlling migrants, knowing their whereabouts and allowing for the deportation of any migrant who is not registered". The annual registrations are a financial burden on guest workers and the brokerage system that provides migrant workers with jobs, documentation and remittance services among others are exploitative, dangerous and are equated with human trafficking (Pollock, 2007, p. 183).

Data on the number of migrant workers employed in Thailand between 1995 and 2006 is provided in Table 4 below.

Since most guest workers' undocumented status threatened their personal security and promoted labour trafficking, the issue soon became a matter of international concern. In 2000 the International Labour Organisation, in collaboration with the United Kingdom's Department for International Development and the United Nation's Human Security Fund (funded by Japan), launched the United Nations Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking (UNIAP) to facilitate a stronger and more coordinated response to trafficking in people in the Greater Mekong subregion (GMS). This project, which is aimed at eliminating the "exploitation component at destination that turns labour migration into human trafficking", involves many communities and grassroots organisations, Thailand, and the other states in the GMS.

Table 4
Thailand: foreign workers, 1995–2006.

	Registered	Non-registered	Total	Registered (%)
1995	293,652	406,348	700,000	42
1996	293,652	424,037	717,689	41
1997	90,911	870,556	961,467	9
1998	99,974	886,915	986,889	10
1999	99,956	563,820	663,776	15
2000	568,249	281,751	850,000	67
2001	409,339	558,910	968,249	42
2002	288,780	711,220	1,000,000	29
2003	849,552	149,848	999,400	85
2004	705,293	807,294	1,512,587	47
2005	668,576	1,104,773	1,773,349	38
2006	460,014	1,339,986	1,800,000	26

Source: Philip Martin, *The economic contribution of migrant workers to Thailand: towards policy development* (ILO: Bangkok, 2007), p. 4.

Subsequently, the Thai government signed MOU with the neighbouring labour-sending countries in the GMS. This strategy was designed to facilitate migrant workers' admittance into a guest worker scheme for two years under the broad umbrella of bilateral agreements. Between 2002 and 2004 three MOU were signed between Thailand and its GMS neighbours – Cambodia, Lao PDR and Burma, to promote cross border “cooperation for the employment of workers”. Thailand also signed three additional MOU with these states to undertake counter trafficking activities between Thailand and the other countries in the Mekong Sub-region (Chantavanich, 2007, 2008).

The MOU on employment cooperation provides for the recruitment of low skilled/undocumented workers for a two-year period under a guest worker program. Employers register their migrant workforce, and registration provides these workers with identification cards. Employers then deduct the registration costs from the workers' pay. The migrant workers consequently become debt-bonded to their employers. They are required to leave Thailand for a set period upon completion of their employment contract, before starting the process all over again. In July 2009 the Thai state commenced a new labour registration process and also hardened its position on the requirement that foreign workers undergo a nationality verification process by a representative from their country of origin and obtain passports into which the work visas can be inserted. The Thai government then issues them a two-year green work permit book. Unlike Cambodia and Lao PDR, the Burmese government refused to register Burmese workers in Thailand and instead set up nationality verification centres just inside the Burmese border with Thailand (Migration News, Vol. 16, no. 4, October 2009).

The work permits are not cheap either. One-year work permits cost 1800 baht. Workers also have to pay a 1000 baht registration fee and a 1900 baht health fee. This amounts to 3800 baht (US\$112) or a month's wages. Most employers pay the registration fee and deduct the payment from the workers' wages. Moreover, workers cannot change their permitted employment sector (although they are allowed to change employers). The Thai state has thus introduced colour-coded work permits for the six sectors where migrant workers are permitted to be employed. These sectors are agriculture, construction, domestic work, fisheries, seafood and others (Bangkok Post, 11 January 2009; Migration News, Vol. 16, no. 3, July 2009).

Both Thai workers and migrant workers come under the scope of the Labour Protection Act of 1998, which guarantees a national minimum wage. But wages in the country vary across sectors, provinces (from 141 baht to 184 baht per day) and specific occupations. Migrant workers' spaces are also restricted. In December 2006 provincial-level restrictions were introduced in Phuket, Thailand, prohibiting migrant workers from using mobile phones without permission from their employers, riding motorbikes or leaving their worksites between the hours of 8 pm and 6 am, and meeting in groups of more than five persons (Migration News, Vol. 14, no. 4, October 2007). Other provinces also enacted similar legislation between September 2006 and January 2007 (Migration News, Vol. 15, no. 2, April 2008).

Like Malaysia, Thailand was also placed in Tier 3 in the 2007 TIP Report. Subsequently, the state enacted new legislation for a comprehensive anti-human trafficking law that came into force in June 2008, and has been commended for making efforts to comply with international “common standards”. Unlike Malaysia it was no longer placed in Tier 3 in 2009. These common standards also include the measures taken to provide labour protections to

migrant workers, as stated above (Bangkok Post, 17 June 2009). Nevertheless, there have been problems with nationality verification. There are reports that Burmese guest workers' families in Burma have been "pressured" to pay taxes on the remittances sent to them. Moreover, guest workers continue to be regarded as "illegals" and "registered migrants remain technically illegal though their deportation is delayed for the duration of their permits" (Migration News, Vol. 17, no. 3, July 2010). Thus migrant workers continue to live perilous lives in Thailand.

3.4. Some concluding thoughts

Contemporary labour migration in Southeast Asia predominantly involves regional labour movements and south-south migrations. It is also contract-driven and is characterised by a growing demand for a spectrum of skills in a range of employment niches. In Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand, mostly men are employed in occupations shunned by locals and are generally paid lower wages than national workers and they often work under appalling working conditions. Their labour enables these countries to maintain their competitiveness in the global economy. Gendered migration is also a key feature of the temporary labour movements since women migrants are recruited largely for domestic work in the "private" home and are treated differently from other migrant workers. An analysis of regulation practices shows that the labour-importing countries appear to face similar problems in governance of migration of low-skilled migrant workers, particularly domestic workers. Hardly any protections and absence of legal rights are major contributory factors leading to the workers' exploitation. The treatment and exploitation also varies between countries and each country has devised its own strategies to address these problems. Of the three countries, Singapore appears to have made the most strides in promoting labour protections. The labour exporters thus need to exchange experiences among themselves and also engage on more equal terms with the labour-importing countries. Building on best practice and greater cooperation with civil society and NGOs may be the way forward.

Acknowledgement

The research on which this paper is based was assisted by the generous support of the Australian Research Council.

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