

Migration and Contentious Politics in Southeast Asia

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Migration is contentious. Regardless if the migrants are Rohingya refugees fleeing horrific persecution, or if the migrants are household and construction workers filling labor gaps, we are at a moment in time when countries view migration as undesirable and in need of regulation and limits. Southeast Asia has seen significant flows of migrants before. In some instances, it has been a peaceful process, but currently, it is a source of considerable tension and conflict. During colonial rule, workers from China and India were embedded into the political economy of subjected territories. During the Vietnam War, refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia were (reluctantly) accepted by neighboring countries and later immigrated to the US. Why do we see variation in responses to migration? This paper looks at two possible answers: First, the politicization of race, ethnicity, religion, and identity has made immigration more problematic for both receiving and sending countries. Second, we see dramatic shifts in attitudes and interests about immigration from great powers. In the 1970s, Southeast Asian countries accepted refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia because the US promised that these refugees would be resettled outside Southeast Asia in the US and her allies. As Rohingya flee ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, no such promise of resettlement has been forthcoming from wealthy countries. So, neighboring countries have little willingness to help the Rohingya on their own. Hegemonic stability theory posits that a hegemon can foster and promote cooperation on a wide variety of international problems, when a hegemon refuses to behave in this way; we are less likely to see cooperation on problems like migration. This paper will explore both the domestic politicization of immigration and at global demonization of migration, which affects conditions in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: migration, Rohingya, Malaysia, Singapore, hegemonic stability theory

Introduction

Migration is a perfect example of the fundamental problem of international relations; what one country does impacts other countries, therefore they need to cooperate to solve common problems, however, this cooperation is often difficult. Just as there are push and pull factors which underlie the movement of people from one place to another, so too does migration pose challenges for both sending and receiving countries. This article examines migration conditions in three discrete time periods: the 19th century migration of Chinese to Southeast Asia; the resettlement of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia to the United States at the end of the Vietnam War; and today's intra-Southeast Asia migration by those seeking work opportunities and the Rohingya fleeing from Burma to neighboring countries. For hundreds of years, Southeast Asia has been the locus of people crossing borders. Countries in the region are made up of diverse populations derived from different waves of human migrations. The different examples examined here provide a way to understand

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varying local and global conditions that underpin migration. The first two periods of migration were facilitated by great powers. In contrast, neither labor migration nor addressing the needs of the Rohingya refugees have prompted great power involvement and have become political landmines across Southeast Asia. No country in Southeast Asia today is welcoming to migrants of any kind and this paper offers an explanation of why.

Under colonialism, indigenous communities had little input or power over labor policies and migration patterns were driven by European economic and political needs. The US viewed taking in refugees in the 1970s as part of the struggle against Communism and while it was contentious, in comparison to the disputes and conflict involved in today's migration debates, this period was less conflict-ridden and thousands of refugees were resettled in the US. Today, leaders in Southeast Asia, Europe, and the United States are vocally denouncing migrants of all types and enacting new laws to limit and proscribe who, and under what conditions, people can enter. What was different in earlier periods? The answer lies, in part, with which countries facilitate the flows of people and for what purpose. During European colonialism in Southeast Asia, importation of Chinese labor aimed to fill labor shortages and was part of broader regional trade links. Local populations had little opportunity to protest against these new comers, although opposition did exist (Wang, 2002). After the Vietnam War, increasing numbers of refugees from Vietnam and Cambodia sought refugee status and asylum in the US. Ultimately, more than one million refugees were admitted into the US and resettled through the combined efforts of private organizations and government funding (Holman, 1996). When great powers support migration and provide incentives and assistance for other countries to do likewise, we see greater accommodation of migrants. When great powers are hostile to migrants, we are unlikely to see smaller countries respond differently.

This article will use the term "migration" to capture a variety of types of movement of people across borders. The term "migrant" is used to convey the (possibly) temporary nature of crossing borders. Immigrants often intend to stay in the place to which they have moved longer term, but migrants' long-term settlement is more contingent (usually on legal and economic grounds). Migrants can and often do become immigrants. If they are able to secure proper legal documentation and a long-term source of employment, migrants do often end up staying in the country to which they have moved. Refugees are those who perhaps never intended to leave their home, but who are forced to do so due to political pressure and/or violence aimed at them. Refugees may also start out as temporary migrants hoping to return home if possible, but often end up settling in the destination country. The causes of migration are well-known and stretch across time and geography. The most common "push" factors are violence, persecution, and lack of economic opportunities in sending countries. The "pull" factors are safety and security, better economic and educational opportunities, and reports home from co-ethnics who have made the journey before (Parkins, 2010; Ullah, 2016). Migrants are not just buffered by these forces, but they are making rational and deliberate choices about their opportunities and well-being (Hare, 1999). The four examples of migration that are discussed here clearly demonstrate both the systemic push and pull dynamics and the decision-making of the migrants themselves.

Current migration tensions in Southeast Asia look like a regional problem; yet, larger global dynamics affect these local issues. Rohingya from Myanmar seek safety in neighboring states. Workers in Indonesia and the Philippines look for job opportunities within East and Southeast Asia and the Middle East. These migrations are problematic for sending and receiving countries, and unlike in the past, the European powers and the US are not leading by example and helping to smooth out the migration process. Instead of facilitating

immigration and helping Southeast Asian countries manage flows of people, Europe and the US are engaging in highly exclusionary policies; demonizing immigrants (Pierce, 2019; Fritze, 2019), curtailing the numbers of people allowed in, and doing little on a global scale to promote better cooperation and more humane policies for vulnerable peoples. When are we likely to see better cooperation on migration conditions? The answer from the examples detailed here is as follows. When great powers demonstrate clear leadership and are willing to provide public goods; in the form of taking in migrants themselves, and helping to create agreements and mechanisms to encourage other countries to take in migrants, or providing economic incentives for others to take in migrants, then we are less likely to see conflicts over migration ameliorated. When hegemonic leaders denigrate immigrants as a threat (Fritze, 2019), and as dangerous “other”; smaller countries also slam their borders shut. There is a significant contrast when leaders view immigration as essential to their country’s interests and when they view migrants as a group worthy of rights and protections; we see dramatic differences not just in domestic policies but in the ability of other states to address the movement of people across borders collaboratively. Thus, when the hegemon does its job, migration is less problematic.

Hegemonic stability theory posits that greater international cooperation results when a superpower provides conditions to help other countries cooperate. For example, a hegemon can provide public goods, like creating rules and treaties to help countries cooperate on specific problems, the hegemon can provide funding and incentives for other countries to comply with the rules and provisions of a treaty. The hegemon can shoulder the costs and burdens in solving collective action problems and overcoming problems of free riders, and can create international organizations to facilitate these processes (Keohane, 2004). What we see in the case of many non-traditional security threats, including problems of migration, is that when a superpower takes an interest in the problem and throws their weight behind crafting (and funding) solutions to the problem, the outcomes are better (Freedman & Murphy, 2018). In the 19th century, migration was facilitated (for better and worse) by colonial powers, like Britain and France; and in the 1970s and 80s, the US and her allies accepted high numbers of refugees as part of broader anti-Communist policies. Currently, however, the US and Europe are hostile to migrants and are doing little at the international level to address global refugee and migrant crises, and thus are making it easier for countries in Southeast Asia to be similarly truculent in improving the mechanisms that facilitate and oversee protections for migrants in the region. When leaders in Southeast Asia demonize minority groups as a threat (often as a political tool to win and retain power), it also creates a climate where migrants are unwelcome (Freedman, 2019).

Chinese Migration to Southeast Asia Prior to WWII

Chinese explorer, Admiral Zheng, traveled to Southeast Asia in the early 1400’s and that marked the beginning of Southeast Asia’s “age of commerce”. Trade routes linking ports in Southeast Asia and China became hubs for other Chinese traders and merchants; some of whom would settle in the region (Pan, 1999, p. 50). The number of Chinese living in Southeast Asia jumped significantly when the Dutch and British reached the region in the 1600s. While there were Chinese communities in Asian ports, like Hoi An, Patani, Banten, Manila, and elsewhere, the numbers were relatively small. The settlements in the Thai and Vietnamese kingdoms were the largest and, by the 1700s, ethnic Chinese there were already integrated into the highest levels of society (Pan, 1999, p. 52). In the 1800s, the number of Chinese leaving China increased with the turmoil and weakness of the Qing Dynasty, and this coincided with greater labor needs of colonial regimes in Southeast Asia. British and Dutch firms needed workers for mining operations, timber, and rubber and as

middleman traders (Suryadinata, 2004, p. 71). The big spike in migration in the mid-1800s continued through the outbreak of World War II.

Table 1

Numbers of Chinese in Southeast Asia

1860	221,438
1900	537,316
1930	1,233,214

Note. Source: Hugo (2004, p. 31).

Migration was facilitated by well-organized networks of labor recruiters who brought over peasants from the same villages and regions in China. Along the way, prospective migrants were handled by co-ethnics who spoke their language and who guided them to boarding houses within China, and then on to ports of embarkation, finally they were connected with firms in Malaya, Indonesia, etc. where they would go to work. Some were just migrant workers who worked a few contracts and then returned home, but many became settlers in Southeast Asia and put down roots (Reid, 1996). European firms profited off these labor contracts, and colonial regimes saw imported labor as more docile and less likely to resist outside political control. It is not surprising that the Chinese overseas in Southeast Asia came to be viewed by local populations in many places as outsiders and they were resented for being given (perceived) favorable treatment by colonial regimes (Wang, 2002). As opposition to colonial rule grew, the British worked to placate native Malays by giving them preference for educational opportunities and civil service jobs. This sort of divide and rule strategy was common under colonialism (Kheng, 2010).

Migration in Southeast Asia during the 1800's and early 20th century was driven by the colonial superpowers. Colonial control facilitated the massive movement of people across borders, regardless of what the local population in receiving countries might have wanted. Migration from China to Southeast Asia is no longer an issue, yet, how to view, incorporate, and tolerate ethnic Chinese continues (more than 100 years later) to be unresolved. Newer sources of tension over immigration include how to deal with hundreds of thousands of Rohingya fleeing extermination efforts in Myanmar, and how to cope with flows of labor migrants within the region. There is no hegemon in the region driving the movement of people across borders and forcing local communities to accept the newcomers. Now, sending and receiving countries have widely divergent interests on the movement of people across boarders and they disagree on how to address the issue.

Immigration to the US From Southeast Asia in the 1970s

From the 1880's until the 1960s, immigration in the US was determined by race-based quotas which favored European immigrants and did not differentiate between refugees and other kinds of migrants. In the wake of the horrors of the Holocaust, the US created a separate refugee category to admit those fleeing well-founded persecution (Holman, 1996, p. 5). US immigration debates in the 1950s-1980s, particularly those having to do with refugee policy, revolved around two factors: (a) reaction to WWII devastation and the plight of Holocaust victims; and (b) part of US' overall anti-Communism strategy and policies. The US admitted 38,121 refugees from Hungary in the 1950s, then approximately 750,000 from Cuba through 1980, and finally, in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, the US admitted approximately one million refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos. (Zucker, 1983; Russell, 2020; Kamm, 1977). The US hoped to encourage other countries

to help resettle refugees, so the US stepped up the number of refugees allowed to enter the country; the goal was to lead by example. In 1975, refugees from Indochina were assisted by federal spending which covered their resettlement costs (IRC, 2016). In 1980, the US established the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) to provide an array of service to refugees coming to the US. There was nativist and racist hostility to allowing refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos to resettle in the US.

A Harris poll taken in May 1975 showed that only 36% all Americans thought the country should admit Vietnamese, Cambodians, or Laotians; 54% thought they should be excluded. Burt Talcott, a Republican Congressman from California, reflected this when he urged the United States not to take refugees because, in his words, “Damn it, we have too many Orientals” (Kelly, 1977, p. 18).

Despite opposition, Congress passed the Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 which provided relief and resettlement to those fleeing war and persecution (Zucker, 1983, p. 174).

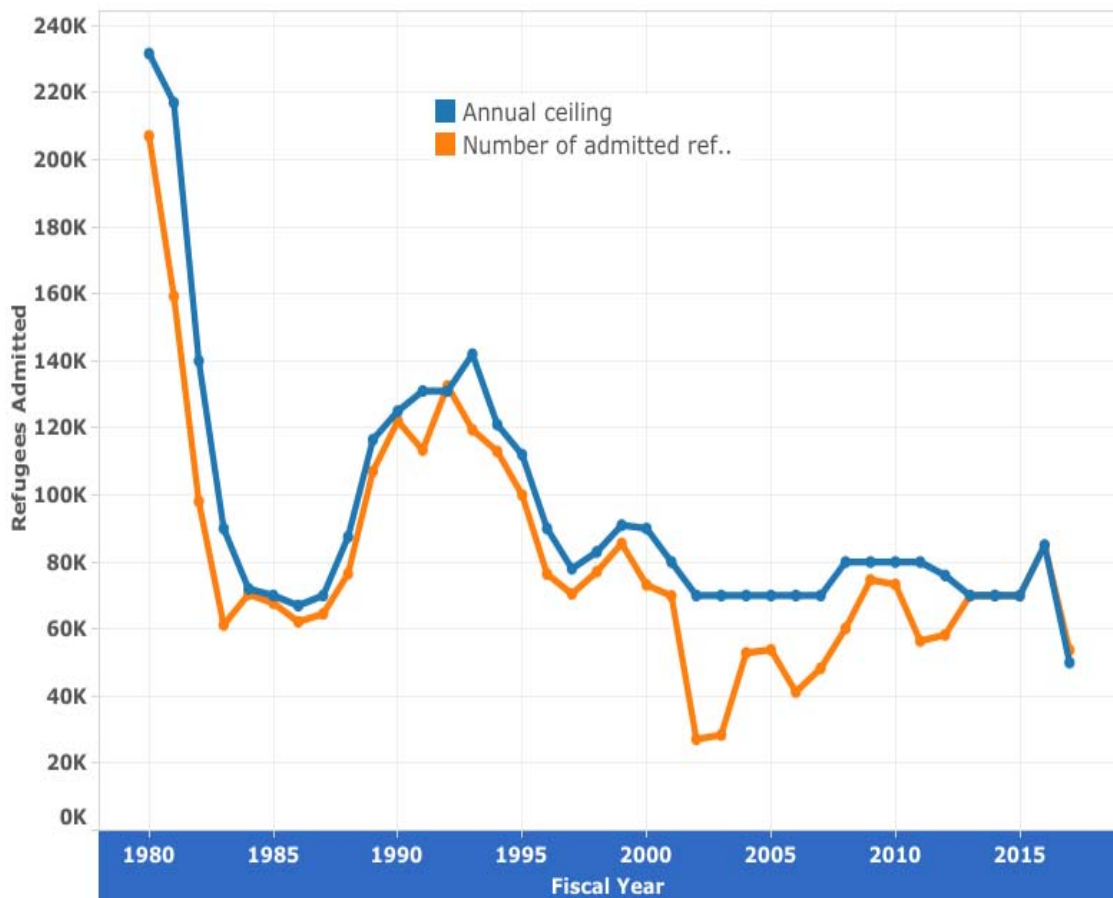


Figure 1. U.S. Refugee admissions and refugee resettlement ceilings, fiscal years 1980-2017 (Source: Migration Policy Institute [MPI] Data Hub, <http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub>).

The number of persons who may be admitted to the United States as refugees each year is established by the President in consultation with Congress.

US attitudes towards immigration may not have been tolerant and welcoming, but, political leadership in the US from some Republicans and many Democrats led to views of immigration and refugee resettlement as part of larger US anti-Communist foreign policy goals and thus we see expanded immigration quotas and refugee allowances even in the face of prejudice and popular skepticism. This continued more or less until the

election of Donald J. Trump in 2016. Trump ran on a platform of denigrating immigrants and calling for a total ban on allowing Muslims into the country, whether as refugees or families reuniting with American relatives, or skilled workers filling key jobs in healthcare or technology (Migration Policy Institute, 2019; Pierce, 2019; Fritze, 2019). Since taking office, a ban on travelers and immigrants from (mostly) Muslim countries has been implemented, and severe cuts have been made to the number of refugees admitted to the US and there has been drastic narrowing of reasons for which asylum is granted. Massive increases in deportation orders for undocumented immigrants have dominated the news since Trump's assumption of office in January of 2017 (Pierce, 2019). The message from the US federal government is that immigrants of all kinds are not welcome and as many roadblocks and obstacles as possible will be put in the way of those trying to move to the US. Not only is President Trump in favor of strict immigration measures in the US, he has gone out of his way to denigrate European countries for their modestly more welcoming immigration policies and he has praised countries in Eastern Europe for refusing to admit Middle Eastern and African migrants (BBC News, 2018; Buncombe, 2017).

Current Trends in Southeast Asia Migrations

Southeast Asia is at peace so migration stems from economic imperatives (in the case of Indonesia, Cambodia, and the Philippines), and targeted persecution (in the case of the Rohingya). Indonesia and the Philippines are two of the world's largest sources of migrant workers; Malaysia and Singapore are two of the largest recipients in Southeast Asia. Conflict within Southeast Asia between countries sending and those receiving migrants is over issues such as working conditions, salaries, abuse, and criminal behavior. Indonesia and the Philippines are both (mostly) democratic countries and treatment of nationals overseas has become a contested issue, putting pressure on elected officials to better protect their rights overseas. Recipient countries also face popular pressure regarding immigrants; after years of tolerating migrant workers who took dirty, dangerous, and low paying jobs, slower economic growth and an increase in the number and visibility of migrants and refugees in countries, like Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore has forced leaders there to take a tougher line against migrants (Ullah, 2016; Raymer, Guan, & Ha, 2019). Political leaders in Malaysia and Singapore have used and sometimes stoked anti-immigrant sentiment to win and keep power. Despite a period of political liberalization in Myanmar, treatment of the Rohingya community dramatically worsened after 2016 and Muslims in Myanmar face relentless state and non-state persecution and demonization.

Sending countries want to see greater worker protections for their migrants overseas; while receiving countries are in fact getting harsher towards migrants. Governments of receiving and sending countries feel competing internal pressures from their citizens. Popular pressure has forced the Indonesian and Philippine governments to take steps to regulate sending people abroad, and in receiving countries of Malaysia and Singapore officials are under pressure, but towards the opposite goal of restricting and rejecting migrant workers. Destination states begrudgingly offered slightly better responses to the abuses that migrants have faced for years, but with slower economic growth, Malaysia and Singapore have reacted by conducting sweeps of undocumented laborers and sending them home (Raymer et al., 2019). This will have a negative effect on the number of migrants able to work in these wealthier countries and it may push undocumented workers further into the shadows. There is pressure on Indonesia and the Philippines to create more jobs at home to make up for lost remittances from overseas workers, which are a significant part of Indonesia and the Philippines' economy. But efforts to boost domestic economic growth are not enough to produce enough local jobs to keep workers

from traveling abroad. The horrific treatment of Rohingya has reminded Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) leaders of their failures to help the least fortunate, but this seems unlikely to change their position on taking in Rohingya refugees for resettlement (Freedman, 2019).

Table 2

Documented Migrant Flows to and From Key States in Southeast Asia in 2015

	From Indonesia	From the Philippines	From Myanmar
To Singapore	66,215	21,443	To Indonesia: 93,244
To Malaysia	119,924	24,106	19,983
Total out migration	2,065,153	780,271	548,922 (most Rohingya have fled to camps in Bangladesh)

Note. Source: Raymer et al. (2019, p. 407).

Origins Countries: Indonesia & the Philippines

Indonesia and the Philippines have long needed to address unemployment and surplus labor. Sending workers abroad has been a corrective for these ills and it is a strategy to alleviate poverty and generate foreign exchange. In Indonesia, the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration (MOM) is charged with overseeing migrant workers. In the Philippines the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA), an agency within the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), licenses (and rates) private recruitment firms and oversees the operation of these agencies sending workers abroad (Ruiz, 2008). In the Philippines, these workers are referred to as “overseas Filipino workers (OFWs)”.

During the Suharto and Marcos era, governments focused on maximizing the number of workers sent abroad to reduce unemployment and enhance remittances. Despite strong economic growth in recent years, almost 40% of Indonesians (and larger numbers of Filipinos) live on \$2 a day or less, producing strong “push” factors for out migration (IOM, 2016). In 2014, the World Bank estimated that Indonesian migrant workers remitted a record \$8.55 billion back to their families, an important source of income, particularly for the rural, mostly impoverished areas from which they hail (Veeramalla, 2015). According to the World Bank, remittances were equivalent to 0.9% of Indonesia’s total gross domestic product. It is estimated that each migrant worker supports five people in Indonesia. As Michele Ford (2005) had observed, the government has been criticized for decades for focusing much more on the remittances of migrant workers rather than their safety and well-being, this was also true in the Philippines until the 1990s.

Obtaining precise data on the number of Indonesian overseas workers is problematic due to the myriad of organizations that play a role in sending of workers abroad, each of which record statistics at different points in the process (Bachitar, 2012; Raymer et al., 2019). According to data from Indonesia’s National Placement and Protection of Overseas Workers Agency (BNP2TKI), there are 4.3 million documented Indonesians working overseas, with the largest numbers in Saudi Arabia and Malaysia (The Jakarta Post, 2014). Women account for almost 80% of official migrant outflows and most work in the domestic sector as maids and caregivers. Government statistics only cover documented workers. Filipino workers can be found in highly skilled positions like nursing (in the US and Europe), and like their Indonesian counterparts, in unskilled jobs throughout Southeast Asia like construction work, plantation jobs, seafaring jobs on commercial fishing boats and merchant marine vessels, maids, housekeeping and childcare. In 2014, the Philippine government had

record of 1,844,710 Filipinos leaving to work overseas (Migrente International), and this figure does not include those who migrate and work illegally.

Migrant workers suffer widespread exploitation and abuse. Many migrant workers find themselves victims of unscrupulous recruitment agencies, corrupt government officials, and abusive employers. Migrants face difficulties while working abroad due to the general disregard for labor laws by employers, if such laws even exist in the host country. Often, migrants go abroad after signing contracts agreeing to a specific job at a specified wage, only to find that the terms of the contract are violated. Many work in jobs deemed “dirty, dangerous and demeaning” in which accidents are frequent. Employment agencies or employers may confiscate their passports, refuse to pay wages, grant days off, and force them to work excessive hours in unsafe conditions. Finally, migrant workers are often victims of sexual assault, and various forms of violence, which can sometimes be the product of disputes regarding labor conditions (Ford, 2005).

Domestic workers are the most vulnerable to exploitation. There is little agreement about what constitutes a fair workload for a domestic worker, and law enforcement agencies are reluctant to monitor conditions in private homes. Domestic workers may be forced to work excessive hours, denied food, the opportunities to practice their religion, and contact their families. Female migrants are often mentally, physically, and sexually abused (The Jakarta Post, 2015d).

In both Indonesia and the Philippines, the labor migration system has a mix of government and private agencies involved and is rife with potential for the exploitation of workers. Government ministries oversee recruitment agencies, but many bureaucrats are easily bribed to overlook a lack of compliance. Some brokers are unlicensed and often exploit uneducated migrants. There are no standardized fees for brokers or recruiters, who have an interest in charging high fees. Migrants often borrow at usurious rates to pay the fee, giving them few options but to continue working to recoup the fee, even if they find themselves in abusive working conditions. Village heads interested in increasing local remittances lie about a migrant’s age if they are younger than the required 21 years. Recruiters promise well-paying, regulated jobs that do not materialize and recruitment agencies fail to provide the stipulated training, thereby sending workers overseas to jobs for which they lack the requisite skills.

Indonesia has had little success in its negotiating efforts with recipient countries to improve working conditions. Poor working conditions and poor safeguards for workers will continue to plague migrant workers as long as there are few incentives for the receiving countries to care enough to regulate employer behavior and as long as the sending countries continue to fail to generate enough jobs at home for poor workers (ASEAN Post, 2019). The Philippines has had greater success in this area. In order to respond to societal pressure, in 1974, the government created the Overseas Employment Development Board (OEDB) to better systematize the process of sending workers abroad. The Board marketed Filipino workers to host nations, recruited workers within the Philippines and helped to facilitate and lower the cost for workers going overseas. This was clearly the government’s attempt to relieve labor pressures at home and to bolster what became an important source of revenue, remittances from overseas workers, while also trying to better protect those workers while overseas (Hall, 2011, p. 63).

Also, in response to abuses (ASEAN Post, 2019) in the 1990s, the Philippine government set up an office inside the foreign ministry, the Office of the Undersecretary for Migrant Workers Affairs (OUMWA) and the law requires the Ministry to set up a Filipino Workers Resource Center in countries where there are high

numbers of overseas Filipino/a workers (OFWs). There are offices in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Brunei, and Singapore in Asia (and others in the Middle East, Europe, US, and Australia). The office registers and provides information and help to OFW, and it is charged with “the provision and coordination of all legal assistance service to be provided to Filipino migrant workers as well as overseas Filipinos in distress” (Ruiz, 2008, p. 2). They also provide a savings program for OFW, so that they have easy access to their money back home in the Philippines. The government has established a network of local lawyers to help with legal or contract disputes. Information is also provided on how to send home remittances and available savings accounts. NGO’s partner with government agencies provides some of these services. The Philippines charges migrants about \$25 each for the necessary paperwork and this money goes into a fund to help defray the costs of these services (Ruiz, 2008, p. 4).

Of course, these efforts at protection only reach those who use official channels to migrate. Close to a million Filipinos migrate through unofficial channels and are undocumented. They have few safeguards and protections. While the government’s efforts have been sincere and there are more resources available to migrants working overseas than prior to the 1990s, and the efforts are more substantial than those from Indonesia, such measures have not stemmed the abuses and degrading conditions that exist in Malaysia and Singapore (and elsewhere) for OFW. Migrant workers still find that their passports (and often cell phones) are confiscated by their employers, pay is sometimes withheld or short changed, and movements are restricted, living quarters substandard. Employers (whether they are plantation owners, construction firms or families hiring maids) in Malaysia and Singapore face few penalties or legal consequences for such treatment (ASEAN Post, 2019).

Destination Countries: Malaysia and Singapore

Historically, both British colonial and Malay leaders welcomed Indonesian migrants to meet the country’s labor needs. Due to shared racial, linguistic, and cultural similarities, Indonesian workers were favored by Malay rulers as demographic buffers against Chinese and Indian immigrants and because the assimilation of the Indonesian migrants helped Malays maintain status as the majority ethnic group. This political calculation grew stronger in the wake of the May 1969 race riots that sparked a reassessment of Malaysia’s ethnic, political, and economic divisions and ultimately led to the adoption of the New Economic policy, an affirmative action policy for the Malays. As the Malaysian economy began to industrialize and many Malays moved from rural areas to urban ones, Indonesians migrants took the agricultural jobs the Malays left behind.

Much of the migration to Malaysia is illegal. The ease of movement across borders and the existence of kinship arrangements mean that strong informal and underground labor networks exist. Given the high recruitment fees paid by Indonesians seeking to migrate legally as well as the fees paid by Malaysian employers to Malaysian labor recruiters, both workers and employers have a financial incentive to use illegal channels rather than formal ones, which raises the potential for migrant workers becoming problems in the bilateral relationship. Indonesians today make up more than half of the foreign labor force, with an estimated 1.2 million documented workers and an estimated one million undocumented workers (IOM, 2010).

Over time, Malaysian perceptions of Indonesian migrants changed dramatically. Malay leaders began to view Indonesian migrants not as ethnic kin to be welcomed but as criminals to be feared (Liow, 2003). As the number of illegals grew, so did competition for jobs, particularly those traditionally dominated by ethnic Malays. Furthermore, it became known that a large number of Indonesian migrants were Christians who had

begun proselytizing among the Malay community, one Malaysian cabinet Minister called the potential conversion to Christianity “the biggest threat facing Muslims in Malaysia today” (Liow, 2003, p. 49). It is common in Malaysian politics for Malay leaders to use religion and ethnicity to shore up support (Freedman, 2000) and so anti-immigrant rhetoric often serves a political purpose for some political elites. A combination of crime, economic and religious conflicts led to a new political discourse in Malaysia that viewed Indonesians as “threats” to national security.

Malaysia began taking a tougher approach to migrant workers. They limited work permits to three years and began detaining illegal migrants. Detention centers were severely overcrowded leading to a riot where Malaysian police were injured. Negative opinion hardened further. The government ratcheted up pressure: flogging and departing illegal migrants. Additionally, government leaders used the press to demonize Indonesian migrants as a dangerous threat to national security (Islam, 2013; Nesadurai, 2013). Over the last 20 years, there have been periodic attempts to ban Indonesian migrants all together, but efforts were quickly dropped when construction projects ground to a halt; construction firms and wealthy families protested against higher costs for domestic workers (Liow, 2003).

Employers have an incentive to employ illegal workers because they are cheaper and easier to exploit due to their fear of deportation. Just as Indonesian and Philippine officials often find it more convenient to direct their anger over the mistreatment of migrant workers at foreign employers and governments rather than crack down on corrupt domestic recruitment agencies, brokers and bureaucrats, similarly, Malaysia prefers to penalize foreign workers rather than the domestic actors that exploit them (ASEAN Post, 2019). Despite some bilateral efforts over the years to regulate labor conditions, wages, and protections, little has been accomplished.

Singapore, like Malaysia, has an ambivalent relationship with its migrant workers. With a population of 5.5 million people, estimates are that Singapore has more than 1.4 million nonresident workers (Singapore, Ministry of Manpower, 2020). A small number of these are high skilled workers employed in finance, multinational firms, in higher education, technology, medicine, etc. These workers are highly sought after and the government has marketed Singapore to this segment of the global work force. Unskilled workers are found in construction, manufacturing, work in shipyards, and domestic labor, have virtually no labor rights or protections. They are not allowed to unionize; there are few limits on work hours or minimum wage protections. The government requires that employers provide housing to unskilled workers, like construction workers, and the government has overseen building of housing complexes where migrants’ employers pay subsidized rent. Workers must pay for their own training and they have few protections and rights. Employers can cancel work visas forcing workers to return home, for any reason. This makes it impossible for workers to complain or advocate for themselves. Domestic workers are classified as semi-skilled and they lack almost all the modest benefits accorded to unskilled workers. Since they work in private homes there is little oversight over their relations with employers. There is little regulatory effort to enforce standardized working hours, compensation, working conditions, or provision of a private space to sleep. Rates of abuses are quite high (Sacco, 2016; & Ponniah, 2013).

There is regional competition for jobs in Singapore, despite abuse. The Philippines requires that employers pay the placement fee for hiring an overseas Filipino worker. But, other countries have not pushed and enforced this requirement and so usually the fee is borne by the workers themselves. Placement and training fees charged by labor agencies are quite high, an average of \$7,256 is incurred in debt to work in Singapore: With wages of

\$18 per day, it would take more than a year to pay this back (Sacco, 2016). The Philippines is the only country to have ratified the International Labor Organization (ILO) convention on domestic workers, which (along with other provisions) bans salary deductions to pay placement fees. This was part of the Philippine government's efforts to better protect their overseas workers, but it would be even better if other sending countries, like Indonesia and Cambodia, also ratified it and agree to the same conditions. If more countries signed the treaty, there would be less of a race to the bottom pitting migrant workers from one country against others.

"The employers know the Filipinos will stand their ground, and they've got government backing" (Ponniah, 2013). Workers from poorer countries such as Burma are marketed as "docile". "When they talk about workers in these terms, it's a license to exploit. They won't complain and will do what they are told... There is the same image, I'm afraid, with workers from Cambodia" (Ponniah, 2013).

Over time in fact, Filipino workers' share of domestic jobs has dropped from 90% 20 years ago, to 20-30% today because of the higher costs of hiring a Filipino maid (Ponniah, 2013). Jobs are then filled by Indonesians, Cambodians, Burmese, Vietnamese, or Nepalese. Fundamentally, sending countries want to protect their workers and keep the remittances flowing. Receiving countries need the labor for jobs that locals do not want to fill, but they have little interest in working to improve labor rights and conditions and there is political pressure on leaders in Singapore and Malaysia to talk tough against immigration and put hard numerical limits on the inflow of people. The same pressure applies to countries facing refugees from Myanmar.

Rohingya Refugees

In addition to the lack of regional cooperation between sending and receiving countries on migrant workers, there is an even more alarming migration issue confronting the region and there is even less consensus and coordination in how this problem is handled. Rohingya are a group of Muslims, most of whom live in Rakhine State in Myanmar along the Bangladeshi border. Rohingya (and other Muslims in Myanmar) have been systematically marginalized from social, economic, and political life and targeted for ethnic cleansing. Most Rohingya are denied full citizenship and are in fact stateless¹ (International Crisis Group, 2014). They are denied land and property rights, as well as having restricted access to education, the right to freedom of movement and employment (Armstrong, 2012). The government has long used violence, transmigration (or displacement into camps), family planning policies, and intimidation to try to change demographics of states where there is ethnic unrest or insurgencies. Throughout the 1990s, Rohingya communities suffered attacks by local neighbors and security forces, many fled to Bangladesh or Thailand only to later be repatriated (Human Rights Watch, 1996). The government resettled communities in shanty towns with few resources or jobs, stripped citizenship from thousands, and passed laws restricting movement, marriage and family choices, and employment options.² For example, in May 2013, local authorities in Rakhine State reaffirmed a ruling from 2005 that forbid Rohingya living in particular townships from having more than two children per couple. Other statutes require the Rohingya to seek official permission to marry. Those violating the law faced imprisonment

¹ The government and most people in Myanmar refuse to use the term Rohingya. Instead, they are referred to as "Bengalis" by the government; implying of course that they come from Bangladesh and thus the government feels justified arguing that they are not citizens of Myanmar and should go elsewhere. The Rohingya have resided in this part of Myanmar for generations and it is believed that most came from parts of India (and parts of what would become Bangladesh) when the region was under British colonial control.

² Being granted citizenship is not an indication that rights will be protected. Human Rights Watch and International Crisis Group have documented how the Kaman ethnic group are recognized as an indigenous group with full citizenship; but because they are Muslims many are stuck in displacement camps and not allowed to move or work freely.

(International Crisis Group, 2014; 2013; Freedom in the World Myanmar, 2014-2016). From 1990-2016, violence by military forces and unofficial militias resulted in hundreds of deaths and hundreds of thousands displaced.

From 2013-2015, Rohingya fleeing Myanmar often paid smugglers to take them by boat to Thailand and then some made it into Malaysia. In mid-2015, Thai officials announced a crackdown on human trafficking and suddenly Thailand shut out these refugees. Smugglers, fearing being caught or having the journey cost more money, started abandoning their ships at sea. This was similar to how boatloads of Vietnamese refugees were treated in the mid-1970s. In the spring and summer of 2015, estimates are that 5,000-8,000 people were left stranded at sea. No country would let them dock or accept the Rohingya as refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has calculated that, in 2014, there were 63,000 refugees from Myanmar coming to Southeast Asia, the numbers rose in later years (Vongkiatkajorn, 2015) yet they met extreme resistance from neighboring states. Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand were already facing public pressures against migrants. As boats were being abandoned, there were no clear policies in place to address the refugees' desperate need for help. Countries continued to refuse entry to the Rohingya until extreme pressure from the media, the international community and organizations like the UN, prompted a series of meetings among regional states. Indonesia and Malaysia agreed that they would take in 7,000 refugees, and Thailand said they would stop turning away boats. These were minimal numbers considering the scope of the problem and the worsening of it to come. There was no clear settlement of the problem; Indonesia and Malaysia at the time announced that the refugees would need to be resettled elsewhere and none of these nations has ratified the UN Refugee Convention calling for basic rights and protections for refugees (Vongkiatkajorn, 2015). The horror escalated in 2017. In August of 2017, a small band of Rohingya claiming to be part of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) attacked some security outposts. The reprisals are almost too horrible to describe. Security forces rounded up Rohingya and killed, raped, and burned men, women, and children. More than 645,000 Rohingya fled by the end of 2017 to Bangladesh. No other states will take them in and resources and aid have been paltry (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

The refugee crisis surrounding the Rohingya has shed a spotlight on the lack of cooperation. Fellow Southeast Asian countries who are being forced to deal with refugees from Myanmar because of this persecution could keep the pressure on Myanmar's leaders, but so far they have not been terribly forceful in doing so. And, neither the US, nor the international community at large has done much to facilitate better cooperation to alleviate the problem and suffering of the Rohingya.

Conclusion

Sending and receiving countries have different interests when it comes to the issue of migration. In the case of Myanmar, the government does not recognize the rights of the Rohingya to live in the country in the first place and is happy to see them flee. In the case of labor migrants' home states of Indonesia and the Philippines; they want to be able to protect their citizens overseas while reaping the benefit of access to jobs and the remittances these workers send home. Receiving countries, like Malaysia and Singapore, need workers to fill jobs which their own citizens do not want to do and which helps them maintain expected levels of economic growth. All four governments feel political pressure by competing groups working to assert their interests. Migrant advocacy groups in sending countries want to maintain access to jobs overseas, but want their governments to do more to protect these workers from abuse. Recruitment agencies in Indonesia have lobbied

hard to keep the government out of their business and they have been able to garner support for weak regulations over their business. In the Philippines, the government has done more to reign in and oversee the employment agencies and this seems to result in marginally greater protections for Filipino workers overseas, but there too private recruitment firms that profit from sending workers overseas regardless of the conditions, want to see less government interference in their ability to make money. The government of the Philippines has also done more to set up offices in receiving countries to help workers once they are overseas. At odds with these efforts, Malaysian and Singaporean politicians are feeling pressure to take a tougher position on migrant labor, particularly undocumented labor and the perception that this leads to higher crime rates and pressure on public services. Covid-19 has only worsened anti-immigrant sentiment and demands for closed borders.

Regionally, the migrant worker issue has triggered conflict among ASEAN states. As a regional organization, ASEAN would be a logical place to look for regulation of this issue. Regular discussions and ministerial meets are held but with little or no binding action having been taken. Protection of migrant workers would mean that Indonesia and the Philippines would be able to influence the internal policies of host countries, which contradicts ASEAN's cardinal rule of non-interference in the domestic affairs of member states. Adherence to ASEAN norms has played a key role in maintaining regional stability in Southeast Asia; while there are a number of issues that would require rethinking this primacy of sovereignty over human rights and security, countries have not yet rethought this norm.

As Helen Nasadurai has argued,

The potential for migrant worker issues to evoke deep emotions and the ease with which that can translate into nationalist outpourings mean that both sending and receiving countries must develop bilateral or regional frameworks that outline best practice standards for the treatment of migrant workers. (Nasadurai, 2013, p. 89)

Nasadurai is correct in her analysis that the migrant worker issue is a potent one that generates strong nationalist sentiments. This makes the development of frameworks outlining best practices difficult. Sending countries are often beholden to policies, or lack of policies and enforcement in receiving countries. Given the down turn in Asia's broader economy, it seems unlikely that Malaysia or Singapore will pass greater protections for migrant workers. It is more likely that there will be continued crack downs on undocumented migrants, and downward pressure to hire cheaper workers from Cambodia who may have even less protection from their government than do Indonesian or Filipino workers. Indonesia and the Philippines will need to generate more job opportunities at home in order for success and pressure to be relieved on this issue. Sadly, it is also unlikely that ASEAN or the ASEAN Economic Community will take a more proactive approach to migration issues, or that the persecution of the Rohingya will end, so migration is likely to remain a sticking point in regional relations for the foreseeable future.

With earlier periods of immigration; under British colonialism and in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, great power needs and behavior were the catalyst for greater accommodation of significant numbers of migrants across borders. While labor migrants emigrated to Southeast Asia from China and India under a variety of circumstances ranging from conditions close to slavery, to indentured servitude, to consensual work contracts (Bates, 2017); the entire system was predicated upon the needs of European business owners looking for cheap, plentiful, and compliant labor. Indigenous populations subjugated by colonial rule had little say or control over the numbers and types of migrants arriving in their midst. At the end of the Vietnam War, the US took in Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees in larger numbers than any group since the end of WWII.

Countries in Southeast Asia had begrudgingly housed these refugees in camps while the US and international agencies processed their refugee applications; they did so because they were promised that the refugees would be resettled elsewhere. While there was opposition in the US to admitting these refugees, support was significant enough to overcome this push back. Willingness to accept refugees was wrapped up in anti-Communist rhetoric, ideology, and spending and it fit the US' growing self-perception of being a multi-ethnic beacon of freedom. Cold War security concerns trumped anti-immigrant sentiment and so bipartisan agreement was possible in the US and made acceptance of the Southeast Asia refugees possible.

What is different about the receptivity to migration was the role of the hegemon (Great Britain in the 19th century, and the US in the 20th century) in facilitating and leading the way. Today, countries in Southeast Asia have little willingness to accept refugees, even those fleeing unimaginable horrors like the Rohingya. And, since neither the US, nor are other wealthy countries (outside of Germany) willing to open their doors to migrants or refugees, nor help other countries to do so, Southeast Asian countries have little incentive to change their stance. Thus, the failures are both of leadership from great powers as well as from regional middle and smaller powers. In addition, anti-immigrant sentiment is at an all-time high in the US and Europe, so it is easy for Southeast Asian leaders to also use nationalism, and religious and ethnic politics to demonize migrants in their region. Those who suffer the consequences are the poorest and most marginal, the migrants themselves.

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