

HUMAN SECURITY AND GOVERNANCE: INDONESIAN ILLEGAL MIGRANT WORKERS IN MALAYSIA^{©Σ}

RAHIMI AHMAD* AND AIZAT KHAIRI†

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the migration of Indonesian workers to Malaysia, with a specific focus on irregular migrants. Despite Indonesia's economic growth, factors such as unemployment, low wages, and limited opportunities in rural areas continue to drive migration. Utilising an integrated framework that combines economic incentives and human security dimensions, this research analyses seven components of human security: economic, food, health, social, personal, community, and political security. Primary data, including face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders, underscores this phenomenon's personal and systemic dimensions. Findings reveal that socio-economic challenges in Indonesia act as push factors, while wage disparities and economic prospects in Malaysia serve as pull factors. However, these benefits come with challenges, such as xenophobia, integration difficulties, and societal instability in the host country. This study highlights the limited efficacy of enforcement measures like deportations and suggests policy reforms addressing root causes. This research contributes to understanding irregular migration governance within a human security framework, offering insights into Malaysia's policy responses.

Keywords: human security; Indonesian workers; illegal migration; push factors; pull factors

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KESELAMATAN INSAN DAN TADBIR URUS: PEKERJA MIGRAN INDONESIA TANPA DOKUMEN DI MALAYSIA

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini menganalisis migrasi pekerja Indonesia ke Malaysia dengan tumpuan khusus kepada migran tidak sah. Walaupun terdapatnya pertumbuhan ekonomi di Indonesia faktor seperti pengangguran, gaji rendah dan peluang terhad di kawasan luar bandar terus mendorong migrasi. Menggunakan rangka kerja bersepadu yang menggabungkan insentif ekonomi dan dimensi keselamatan insan maka kajian ini menganalisis tujuh komponen keselamatan insan iaitu ekonomi, makanan, kesihatan, sosial, peribadi, komuniti dan keselamatan politik. Data primer iaitu temu bual bersemuka dengan pihak berkepentingan utama menggariskan dimensi peribadi dan sistemik fenomena ini. Hasil kajian mendapati bahawa cabaran sosio-ekonomi di Indonesia bertindak sebagai faktor penolak manakala jurang gaji dan prospek ekonomi di Malaysia bertindak sebagai faktor penarik. Walau bagaimanapun, situasi ini wujud dengan cabaran seperti xenofobia, kesukaran integrasi dan ketidakstabilan masyarakat di negara tuan rumah. Kajian ini menyerlahkan keberkesanan terhad langkah penguatkuasaan seperti pengusiran dan mencadangkan pembaharuan dasar yang tertumpu pada usaha untuk menangani masalah asas. Penyelidikan ini menyumbang kepada pemahaman tadbir urus migrasi yang tidak teratur dalam rangka kerja keselamatan insan serta mencadangkan idea dalam pembuatan dasar luar Malaysia berkenaan isu ini.

Kata kunci: keselamatan insan; pekerja Indonesia; migrasi tidak sah; faktor penolak; faktor penarik

Introduction

The migration of Indonesian workers abroad is a significant global trend, with an estimated 23.6 million Southeast Asian migrants living outside their countries of origin. In 2016, over 9 million Indonesians worked overseas, representing almost 7% of the country's labour force (Ramli et al., 2024). The migration trend is influenced by push and pull factors, including socioeconomic, political, and cultural influences. Understanding the variables that motivate Indonesian workers to migrate is crucial as they have economic, social, and national security repercussions. The migration of Indonesians to Malaysia is driven by both push and pull factors. Push factors include poverty, unemployment, and limited economic opportunities in Indonesia, particularly in rural areas. On the other hand, pull factors include the demand for low-cost labour in Malaysia, particularly in sectors like palm oil plantations, domestic work, and construction. Labour shortages are evident in sectors that contribute significantly to the nation's GDP, and Malaysians' hesitation to engage in 3D jobs has urged businesses to search for workers abroad. The government has put more effort into bringing foreign workers from other countries to bridge the labour gap. However, issues like less flexibility and unsatisfactory work environments have adversely impacted local interest in these sectors. Illegal migration, particularly among Indonesian migrant workers, is a significant issue in Malaysia, with both migrants and the host country facing numerous challenges. The primary motivation for migration is economic prospects, as rising unemployment and limited job opportunities in Indonesia drive many to seek better opportunities abroad. Social networks are crucial in facilitating migration, as many Indonesian workers rely on established connections within Malaysia.

Once in Malaysia, Indonesian illegal migrant workers often face numerous challenges, such as low-skilled jobs in sectors like agriculture, construction, and domestic work. The Malaysian economy benefits from the cheap labour of these migrants, especially in sectors that are otherwise unattractive to local workers (Silvia & Choirul 2024). However, the influx of illegal migrants can also fuel xenophobia and social tensions, as well as strain public services like healthcare, education, and social services. The Malaysian government has implemented various policies to manage illegal migration, focusing on enforcement and deterrence. However, the social impact of illegal migration has also been significant, with increasing crime rates and a need for in-depth research to understand the push and pull factors shaping this migration pattern. Understanding the socio-economic dynamics that drive Indonesian workers to seek employment abroad and the factors that attract them to Malaysia is crucial for developing effective policies and strategies to address this issue.

Table 1: Total of arrests by Cases and Foreign Nationals Throughout Malaysia from Jan – Sept 2024

JUMLAH TANGKAPAN MENGIKUT KES DAN WARGANEGARA ASING SELURUH MALAYSIA											
JAN SEHINGGA SEP 2024											
Bil	Negara Asal	Jenis Jenayah									Keseluruhan (3 Tahun)
		Jenayah Kekerasan				Jenayah Harta Benda					
		2020	2023	2024	Jumlah	2022	2023	2024	Jumlah		
1	ALGERIA	1	1	3	5	4	1	18	23	28	
2	BANGLADESH	134	134	130	398	168	191	218	577	975	
3	CHINA	9	14	17	40	16	21	43	80	120	
4	COLOMBIA	-	-	-	-	-	5	-	5	5	
5	FILIPINA	79	69	38	186	196	232	308	736	922	
6	INDIA	39	59	58	156	66	88	102	256	412	
7	INDONESIA	142	213	147	502	438	577	459	1,474	1,976	
8	IRAN	3	2	1	6	1	13	16	30	36	
9	COMBODIA	1	5	1	7	-	7	10	17	24	
10	LAOS	1	0	-	1	1	2	1	4	5	
11	MESIR	0	4	-	4	-	2	1	3	7	
12	MOROCCO	0	2	-	2	-	2	1	3	5	
13	MYANMAR	198	266	218	682	163	268	207	638	1,320	
14	NEPAL	34	49	50	133	28	38	41	107	240	
15	NIGERIA	11		11	22	6		5	11	33	
16	PAKISTAN	34	59	26	119	23	69	101	193	312	
17	SINGAPORE	3	3	2	8	1	6	8	15	23	
18	SRI LANKA	3	23	8	34	14	8	12	34	68	
19	SYRIA	1	4	2	7	2	3	1	6	13	
20	THAILAND	8	16	9	33	18	32	25	75	108	
21	TIMOR LESTE	0	5	-	5		2	-	2	7	
22	VIETNAM	5	13	23	41	30	43	22	95	136	
23	YAMAN	0	2	3	5	1	6	5	12	17	
24	MONGGOLIA	0	0	-	-	11	1	14	26	26	
25	Tidak Pasti	1	6	3	10	10	6	6	22	32	
	Jumlah	2727	2972	2774	2406	3219	3646	3648	4444	6,850	

Source: Royal Malaysian Police (2024)

The arrests of foreign nationals in Malaysia from January to September 2024 show significant trends in crime patterns by nationality and type. The highest number of arrests come from Indonesia (5,828), Myanmar (1,639), and Bangladesh (875), suggesting a significant involvement of individuals from these countries in criminal activities. The data classifies crimes into violent and border offenses, with violent crimes totalling 2,404 arrests and border-related crimes increasing from 3,219 in 2020 to 3,668 in 2024 (Tjitrawati & Mochamad 2024). Indonesians account for nearly 3,000 of these cases, likely due to ease of entry and established migration routes. The data has important policy implications for Malaysia, suggesting the government may need to strengthen border security, particularly on routes used by Indonesians, by employing advanced surveillance, increasing patrols, and collaborating with neighbouring countries. Efforts to establish legal pathways for migrant workers can reduce reliance on irregular entry routes and border-related offences. The surge in Indonesian workers' migration abroad is driven by various factors, including economic growth and regional integration, but it raises concerns about human security. Existing studies have mainly focused on economic aspects, neglecting a comprehensive examination of social and political concerns. This research aims to explore the push and pull factors influencing illegal migrants from Indonesia and the intervening variables that may affect this relationship, with the ultimate goal of informing policies that can enhance understanding and help Malaysia improve governance.

Methodology

This study focuses on Indonesian illegal migrant workers in Malaysia, examining their impact on human security. Primary data was gathered through face-to-face interviews with stakeholders at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Home Affairs and senior officers from related enforcement agencies. Secondary data was gathered from internet sources, articles, and journals. The study aims to determine the push and pull factors of Indonesian migrants working abroad, which can threaten human security in Malaysia. The research uses a descriptive and qualitative approach, focusing on the main causes of these factors. The study uses an audio tape recorder to record interview sessions, focus group discussions, observation sessions, and notes to retain focus and clarify questions. The data is analysed using a qualitative method and explanatory and interpretative approaches to examine data from interviews, focus group talks, and observation sessions. The study also uses a content analytical approach to draw general conclusions based on the developed proposition in existing rational choice theory. The results of the analysis are used to formulate the research findings.

Literature Review

This paper examines the factors driving migration from Indonesia, the pull factors that make Malaysia the chosen country for migration, and the human security challenges Malaysia faces. It uses a systematic method to summarise evidence from previous studies, focusing on socio-economic pressures, economic incentives, and the resulting challenges for human security and policy-making in Malaysia. The review uses data from various sources, including scholarly journals, articles, books, and related theses.

Socio-Economic Push Factors Driving Indonesian Migrant Workers

The existing literature highlights socio-economic pressures and limited opportunities within Indonesia as significant push factors driving migration to Malaysia, particularly through irregular channels. Economic challenges are consistently cited as a central factor. Widespread poverty, unemployment, and low wages, especially in rural areas, compel Indonesians to seek employment abroad. Raharto (2020) and Surwandono and Wiyono (2019) emphasize that provinces such as East Nusa Tenggara, West Java, and Lombok experience higher-than-average poverty and unemployment rates, making their residents particularly vulnerable to migration pressures. Additionally, economic inequality and uneven development within Indonesia exacerbate the situation. Urban areas receive more government investment and offer better job opportunities, while rural areas remain deprived. As a result, rural Indonesians are driven to seek employment abroad, even under dangerous and illegal conditions (Rahmadi & Kurniawan, 2022). Furthermore, disrupted agricultural livelihoods caused by climate change and natural disasters add to the economic hardships, compelling individuals to migrate in search of stability.

The social dimension of migration also plays a critical role. In certain regions, migration has evolved into a cultural strategy and is normalised as a viable means to address financial difficulties. Hugo (2021) highlights the role of social networks and returning migrants, who encourage others to follow similar paths. This normalisation reduces the stigma and concerns associated with irregular migration, as migration becomes an accepted solution for financial stability. Jones et al. (2022) observe that remittances sent back by migrant workers provide essential support to families left behind, further entrenching migration as a survival strategy. Silvey (2021) adds that inadequate access to infrastructure, formal employment, and public services in rural areas

intensifies the economic pressures, particularly for low-skilled individuals, leaving them with few domestic opportunities. While push factors create the incentive to leave, pull factors attract Indonesian migrants to Malaysia. Suprobo (2019) identifies higher wages, better working conditions, and job security in Malaysia as the primary pull factors. Migrants perceive Malaysia as a destination offering economic prospects unattainable in Indonesia. Wijaya and Fajarningsih (2018) highlight the role of educational opportunities, including access to quality education and skill development, which serve as additional incentives for migration. Established migration networks further facilitate this process by providing social support, information, and resources that lower the risks and barriers associated with migration (Handayani & Kurniasari, 2020).

Regional economic disparities within East and Southeast Asia also contribute to migration flows. According to Fong and Shibuya (2020), international migration in the region is heavily influenced by economic differences, where migrants move from less developed areas to countries offering better employment opportunities. Globalisation has further accelerated these patterns, driving the flow of goods, information, and labour across borders. The literature underscores a complex interplay of push and pull factors that shape migration dynamics between Indonesia and Malaysia. Economic hardships in Indonesia—stemming from poverty, unemployment, and rural underdevelopment—act as major push factors, while the prospect of higher wages, job stability, and better opportunities in Malaysia serve as pull factors. Social networks, remittances, and the normalisation of migration as a cultural strategy further reinforce this phenomenon. Together, these factors contribute to sustained migration flows despite the risks associated with irregular migration.

Migrant Workers Issues in Malaysia

The demand for foreign labour, particularly in low-skilled sectors, is a significant pull factor that attracts Indonesian migrants to Malaysia. Malaysia's economic growth and labour market structure create demand in industries such as construction, agriculture, and domestic work, where local workers are either unwilling or unavailable to meet labour needs (Kour, 2023). Indonesian migrants find this demand appealing, as wages in Malaysia are significantly higher than in Indonesia. Geographic proximity and cultural similarities also serve as pull factors, as Malaysia's close location reduces migration costs and facilitates easy movement. Established migration networks between Malaysia and Indonesia lower the economic and logistical barriers to migration and help migrants secure employment upon arrival. Migrants from Indonesia are viewed as cost-effective labour, often willing to work in hazardous and underpaid jobs that local Malaysians may avoid. Social media and communication technology also reinforce these pull factors.

The decision for Indonesian workers, including illegal migrants, to seek employment in Malaysia is driven by a confluence of complex human security issues rooted in Indonesia's economic, political, social, and environmental challenges. The high prevalence of poverty and lack of economic opportunities within Indonesia has forced many Indonesians to look beyond their borders for employment, with neighbouring Malaysia offering significantly higher wages on average. Weaknesses in Indonesia's regulatory frameworks and enforcement mechanisms have compounded these challenges, leaving many workers vulnerable to exploitation and perpetuating illegal migration (Kanpathy, 2020). Addressing these complex and interconnected human security challenges requires a comprehensive and collaborative approach involving policy reforms, improved cross-border cooperation, and targeted investments in social and economic development within Indonesia.

Human Security Challenges and Governance

The influx of illegal migrants from Indonesia to Malaysia has heightened human security concerns, affecting social stability, public health, and security policies. Undocumented migrants are vulnerable to exploitation and human rights violations (Caron & Yusof 2021). Overpopulation in urban areas leads to social tensions as locals perceive migrants as job competitors, fostering xenophobia (Iskandar et al., 2023). Malaysia's strict immigration policies, focused on enforcement and deportation, are viewed as ineffective and can increase migrants' vulnerabilities (Rahman & Abdullah, 2022). Scholars like Rahim and Lin (2024) call for comprehensive policies, including bilateral labour agreements and better protections for migrant rights. Seasonal amnesty programs often result in cycles of irregular migration, as noted by Wan and Abdul Rahim (2022). Driven by economic hardships in Indonesia and better job prospects in Malaysia, the migration issue requires enhanced bilateral and regional cooperation to improve human security for both migrants and local communities.

Analytical Frameworks

Migration is a complex global phenomenon driven by various economic, political, environmental, and social factors. The Neoclassical Theory of Migration, which highlights wage disparities as a key motivator, suggests that individuals migrate to improve their financial well-being (Lucia 2011). Developed by Hicks, Lewis, Harris, and Todaro, this theory asserts that higher wages and better job opportunities attract migrants to countries like Malaysia (Todaro and Smith 2006). However, this theory has been criticised for its simplicity, as it overlooks political instability and social networks (Arango 2000). Illegal migration often arises from restrictive immigration policies, pushing individuals toward undocumented entry (Massey 1998). The push and pull models explain this dynamic, with push factors (e.g., poverty, unemployment) driving migration and pull factors (e.g., higher wages) attracting migrants to host countries (Buzan 1998).

Undocumented migrants face significant vulnerabilities, including a lack of legal protections, making them susceptible to exploitation (Borjas 2008). Human security, defined by the United Nations, focuses on individual well-being, encompassing economic, health, and personal safety. Barry Buzan (1998) argues that states are crucial for ensuring human security but can also create insecurities. For Indonesia, remittances from migrants support local economies, while Malaysia must address the challenges posed by undocumented workers. Although the Neoclassical Theory provides an economic rationale for migration, it is essential to consider the broader factors influencing migration. The United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (2009) emphasises that human security requires a comprehensive understanding of the threats and factors contributing to insecurity. The research examines the correlation between the Independent Variable (IVs) and the Dependent Variable (DV).

The IVs will focus on the factors that push Indonesian illegal migrant workers towards Malaysia's security issues, focusing on seven human security elements: Economic Security, Food Security, Health Security, Social Security, Personal Security, Community Security, and political security. The DV will examine the factors affecting Malaysia's human security due to illegal migration and the host country. The analytical framework will identify the governance of Malaysian and Indonesian ministries and their organisation and governance towards the relationship between the IV and DV. The study will employ the analytical framework to analyse the push and pull factors influencing

individuals to migrate abroad. The dependent variable (DV) will be the impact of illegal migrants on Malaysian human security.

Key Findings and Discussions

Indonesia is the largest source of migrant workers in Malaysia, driven by economic disparities, demographic pressures, inadequate social protection, environmental challenges, and established migration networks. Many Indonesians, especially from less developed eastern provinces, face significant income gaps and high unemployment, prompting them to seek better opportunities in Malaysia. The lure of higher wages and improved living conditions, even through irregular means, remains a strong pull factor. Economic insecurity is the primary driver of illegal migration, with many Indonesians experiencing financial instability due to limited job opportunities and persistent poverty, affecting approximately 26 million people (Mazlan et al. 2024). Regions reliant on agriculture face unpredictable incomes, while urban areas are saturated with informal, low-paying jobs. Malaysia's demand for labour in sectors like plantations, construction, and domestic work presents a compelling economic incentive for migration.

Social security also plays a crucial role, as many Indonesians lack access to quality education and vocational training, perpetuating cycles of unemployment. Societal expectations often pressure individuals to migrate to support their families, normalising illegal migration despite its risks. Political security issues, including corruption and ineffective governance, further exacerbate economic disparities and contribute to the decision to migrate. Informants express that poverty, societal expectations, and government neglect leave them with few alternatives, making illegal migration to Malaysia seem like the only viable option. The BAGHUS model highlights that economic, social, and political insecurities are the predominant push factors driving this migration. While other factors like health or food security may also play a role, addressing these root causes requires efforts from the Indonesian government, including sustainable economic development, education reform, and improved governance. Integrating human security considerations into domestic and regional policies is essential to mitigate illegal migration and its associated challenges.

Malaysia has long attracted Indonesian migrant workers due to its geographical proximity, cultural similarities, and economic opportunities. The pull factors driving this migration are closely linked to the human security framework, particularly through the BAGHUS model, which highlights social, community, and political security. Social security in Malaysia offers better wages, access to social networks, and an improved quality of life compared to Indonesia. The demand for labour in sectors like construction, plantations, and domestic work provides higher pay, even for undocumented workers (Savitra, 2024). Financial support from employers and local networks helps migrants settle, creating a sense of stability often lacking in their home country. Community security plays a significant role, as cultural and linguistic similarities facilitate integration. Established Indonesian communities in Malaysia offer informal support, such as housing and job placement, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing uncertainties associated with migration. This cultural alignment enhances the appeal of Malaysia as a destination.

Political security is another critical factor. While undocumented migrants lack legal protections, they perceive Malaysia as having better governance and stability compared to Indonesia. Malaysian policies that create demand for migrant labour signal an openness that encourages migration, further amplified by Indonesia's political

inefficiencies in addressing unemployment (Virgina, Chandra & Lita 2024). Overall, the pull factors attracting Indonesian illegal migrant workers to Malaysia are rooted in social, community, and political security, highlighting Malaysia's perceived opportunities and stability. To address these migration issues, collaboration between Indonesia and Malaysia is essential, focusing on creating pathways for legal migration, enhancing human security in Indonesia, and managing pull factors effectively through governance and policy reform.

The presence of Indonesian illegal migrant workers in Malaysia poses significant human security challenges, impacting both countries. As of July 2023, approximately 8.9% of Malaysia's population is undocumented, with an estimated 3.5 million migrants (Missbach & Wayne 2024). This situation raises concerns about labour exploitation, criminal activity, and public health risks, while political narratives linking migrants to crime exacerbate public anxiety. The influx of these migrants affects Malaysia's economic, social, and political security. Economically, Indonesian migrants fulfil labour demands in sectors like agriculture and construction, enhancing competitiveness but straining public resources. Their undocumented status often means they do not contribute to tax revenues while relying on public services, leading to tensions with local citizens and perceptions of economic insecurity. Socially, undocumented migrants face overcrowded living conditions and limited access to services, contributing to public health risks and fostering marginalisation.

This marginalisation can result in social unrest, particularly in resource-scarce areas, as public perceptions view migrants as threats to community well-being. Politically, managing illegal migration presents governance challenges, requiring a balance between enforcement and humanitarian considerations. The influx of undocumented workers raises concerns about national sovereignty and the effectiveness of immigration enforcement. At the same time, the exploitation of migrants in informal labour markets complicates Malaysia's domestic and international reputation (Nixon, 2024). To address these challenges, Malaysia needs improved governance that tackles the root causes of illegal migration while ensuring the rights of all parties involved. Collaborative efforts with Indonesia, such as enhancing legal migration pathways and labour agreements, are essential. By integrating human security principles into its policies, Malaysia can develop a more effective and inclusive approach to migration management, addressing the complexities of its economic, social, and political landscape.

Conclusion

This research examines the factors driving illegal Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia, emphasising the complexities of migration within the BAGHUS human security framework, which encompasses seven dimensions: economic, food, health, social, personal, community, and political security. Despite Indonesia's economic growth, emigration rates have risen due to persistent challenges such as economic disparities, demographic pressures, lack of social protection, environmental issues, and established migration networks. The study identifies deficiencies in economic, social, and political security as the main drivers of migration. Widespread poverty, unemployment, and limited access to stable income push Indonesians to seek better opportunities in Malaysia. Governance failures, including corruption and ineffective labour policies, further exacerbate these pressures. While economic and social insecurities dominate, food insecurity and limited healthcare access contribute to migration decisions.

The research highlights social, community, and political security as key dimensions

attracting migrants to Malaysia. The demand for low-skilled labour in Malaysia, higher wages, and better living conditions make it an appealing destination. Cultural similarities and existing Indonesian communities provide support networks that enhance migrants' sense of safety and stability. Additionally, Malaysia's better healthcare infrastructure and perceptions of safety further attract migrants. The influx of undocumented migrants impacts Malaysia's economic, social, and political security. While migrants help to fill labour shortages, their undocumented status strains public resources and creates fiscal imbalances. Socially, overcrowding and marginalisation can lead to tensions within local communities. Politically, managing illegal migration poses significant governance challenges, including border management and labour market regulation. Health and food security are also affected, as migrants often lack access to formal healthcare and may influence local agricultural dynamics. The findings emphasise the interconnected nature of push and pull factors and the resulting human security challenges. A holistic approach is necessary to address illegal migration, considering all dimensions of the BAGHUS framework. Policy responses should target root causes in Indonesia, such as improving economic opportunities and governance, while Malaysia can enhance immigration policies and foster bilateral cooperation. By integrating human security principles into policymaking, both nations can work towards sustainable solutions to the challenges of illegal migration.

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