Indonesian Labour Migration to Malaysia: Trends and Policy Implications

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Introduction

In the 1990s, international migration is occurring on an unprecedented scale, involving a wide cross section of populations and taking on a greater variety of forms than at any time in history. This is nowhere more true than in the Asian region where rapid economic growth, inter-country contrasts in the extent of labour surplus or shortage, the transport and communication revolution and the globalisation tendencies in business activity have seen a burgeoning of international population flows. An important (and increasing) element in these movements has been that of undocumented or illegal migrants. However, our knowledge of international population movements within Asia remains limited. Not only is there uncertainty regarding the underlying causes and consequences of this movement, but in many cases the scale and composition of flows is not known. This of course especially applies to the burgeoning illegal movements. The aim of this paper is to focus on one of the largest migration streams in which illegal movements have predominated – that from Indonesia to Malaysia. A synthesis is attempted of what is currently known regarding the nature, causes and consequences of labour movement between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Historical roots

It is important to realise that contemporary large-scale movement from Indonesia to Malaysia has strong historical precedents. Although reports of movement of Javanese workers to Malaysia go back five centuries and evidence of movements between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula even further, the movement particularly gained momentum during the colonial period, especially in the late nineteenth century. Temporary labour migration was an important element whereby the resources of the Netherlands East Indies were exploited by the Dutch (Hugo, 1982). There were three major types of such movement:

- forced migrations to work on plantations, roads, etc. in which the potential migrant was given little or no choice;
- "contract coolie" migrations in which workers were recruited to work, usually on a plantation, for a given period (penal sanctions were applied if the conditions of the contract were broken);
- spontaneous migration whereby the migrant sought work temporarily away
from his/her home place either on their own initiative or through that of friends or family.

Each of these types of movement has both an internal and an international component. With respect to forced movement, besides virtual slavery in early colonial years, the Romusha forced labour saw the Japanese occupation forces in the 1940s transporting Indonesians to work on railway and other construction projects in Thailand, Burma and elsewhere. Contract labour gradually came to replace slavery, corvée and labour in lieu of taxes after 1870. Recruiters were common in many areas of Java in colonial times (Hugo, 1975) and significant numbers of contract workers were sent abroad especially to the Malay Peninsula (Jackson, 1961) and Surinam, but also to New Caledonia, Siam (Thailand), British North Borneo (Sabah), Sarawak, Cochin China (Vietnam) and even Australia. In the early twentieth century, the colonial government attempted to stop the activities of companies recruiting labour for foreign countries except where specially licensed, although contract labour recruitment within the country continued. Accordingly, as a result of contract coolie movements, by 1930 there were 89,735 Java-born persons living in Malaya (Bahrin, 1967:280) and 170,000 ethnic Javanese residents (Volksstelling, 1936, VIII:45). There were also 5,237 Java-born persons in British North Borneo (now Sabah) in 1922 (Scheltema, 1926:874). In addition to the contract coolie movements of the Java-born, there were also significant, largely spontaneous labour movements of Minangkabau, Batak, Bugis, Banjarese and Bawean migrants to Malaya from other islands of the Netherlands East Indies.

Labour movements from the Netherlands East Indies (NEI) to Malaya increased in the 1930s (Bahrin, 1967) and the major patterns are depicted in Figure 1. The diagram also shows the distribution of the birthplaces of Indonesian-born residents of Malaya recorded at the 1947 Malaya census. The number of Java-born recorded was 189,450 (an increase of 111 per cent over the 1930 figure). There were also 62,400 Banjarese from South Kalimantan and 26,300 Sumatrans, predominantly Minangkabau, from West Sumatra and Mandaling Batak from North Sumatra. The Minangkabau movement was a longstanding one with many settling in the Negri Sembilan area (Hadi, 1981). There were also 20,400 Bawean-born and 7,000 Celebes-born people identified (Bahrin, 1965:53). These figures of course only apply to Peninsular Malaysia and it should be mentioned that there was significant movement from the NEI into British North Borneo and, to a lesser extent, Sarawak.

The so called "Boyanese" group presents an interesting case. They come from the tiny island of Bawean which currently has a population of around 66,000 and is frequently known as the "Island of Women". In almost all households on the island, the male head or a son is away working in Malaysia or Singapore (Anon., 1982). This movement has become a rite de passage in the society for young men to the extent that a woman is reported to have sought to divorce her husband on the grounds that he isn't really an adult man because he has never gone merantau (migrated temporarily) (Subarkah, Marsidi and Fadjari, 1986:2). This migration is said to date back to links established with Palembang in the early seventeenth century when the Sultan of Bawean was converted to Islam by a missionary from the southern part of Sumatra. In any case they were recorded as a distinct group in the Singapore census of 1894 and had increased to 22,000 by the 1957 census (Vredenbregt, 1964). They also appear to