

The political impacts of migration in Southeast Asia – A Case Study on migrants from Burma

International migration has become increasingly recognized as a phenomenon of great complexity and growing importance in a globalized world. With nearly 200 million international migrants living, working, studying, and settling in a State which they are not nationals, such a phenomenon has become a critical topic of global policy debate. Like many parts of the world, the Southeast Asian (SEA) region is not spared from this global phenomenon, having 5.3 million registered migrants within the region, (Facts on ASEAN population: ASEAN Secretariat) while it is speculated the number of irregular migrants match the registered ones.

Migration patterns in SEA are characterized by increasingly large numbers of people trying to escape abject poverty, run away from insecurities, conflicts, persecution and civil wars in the case of Burma and seek better livelihoods in neighboring countries in the region. Asymmetrical development within the region and economic disparity among the countries divide the SEA region into one group of affluent countries (Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand) and another of acutely underdeveloped countries (Burma, Laos, Cambodia). To name a few, push factors are unemployment, armed conflicts and environmental degradation, which leads to crop failure, thereby pushing people to migrate (Martin 2009). Pull factors include, in higher income countries, female labor participation and a lack of state-sponsored social services--caused by rapid economic development--which created a vacuum for care work and the need to recruit care workers. Economically successful SEA countries utilize migration as a resolution to offset the countries' labor shortage by importing a workforce that is willing to work for low wages (Skeldon, 2000).

Migrants from Burma constitute a sizeable percentage of the South East Asia migrant population, with the most popular destinations being Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. Real estimates are difficult to obtain as the majority are in irregular status, however it is estimated to number around 4 million. Critical factors influencing Burmese migration are both political and economic, including restricting political conditions and dire economic situation, a lower per capita income (\$1200) than even Laos and Cambodia (CIA: the World Fact Book, 2009).

This paper will attempt to understand what extent migration has contributed or impeded democratization processes in Burma. In doing so, it will investigate to what degree migrants from Burma enjoy democratic rights in destination countries. In the same vein, this paper will try to analyze the internal repercussions of Burmese migrants being exposed to civil and political freedoms outside of the country, and in turn, how this affects their behavior upon their return. Drawing on empirical evidence manifested during the Saffron Revolution (the 2007 monk-led people's uprising) and Cyclone Nargis, this paper will further analyze how the migrant population mobilized and organized during a time of political and social turmoil inside the country. From another point of view, considering how many households in Burma are dependent upon remittances for their livelihood, this paper will speculate on the degree to which this external economic contribution of migrants helps maintain the political status quo. Lastly, it will focus on how destination countries and their actors help promote or hamper the migrant's democratic rights in the destination countries. Conceptually and theoretically, the paper will adopt an inter-disciplinary approach, drawing largely from transnational movement, political organization, and migration theories. As a methodology, primary information will be collected from migrants' service centers, migrant associations, NGOs, academics, migration field workers, and Church groups in Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Secondary data will be collected from existing literature, news media, and official statements.

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Panel Democratisation and Migration in Southeast Asia

Hong Kong as a *hot spot* for diffusion: Ethnic-transnational, transethnic-transnational and global advocacy of migrant domestic workers

Although it is clearly not a democracy, the Special Autonomous Region (SAR) Hong Kong is being promoted as a "global city" and can be seen as a case of neoliberal exceptionalism and experimentalism where certain freedoms are granted (Constable/Ong). Because of the resulting political opportunity structures, for more than 25 years Hong Kong has been the site of a high degree of activism and organizing among migrant domestic workers. While the exclusively female migrants are granted freedom of assembly and expression as well as the right to organize, these rights are strictly separated from citizenship. Thus, all migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong are contract workers, often remaining in a state of "permanent temporary labor migration".

Until the mid-1990s, Filipinas had been the overwhelmingly dominant group of domestic workers in Hong Kong. But recent years have seen a dramatic increase of Indonesian domestic workers, resulting in almost equal numbers in 2007 (Filipinas: 122,800; Indonesians: 112,800, as well as 4,100 Thais and 3,400 domestic workers from other countries of origin).

It is remarkable that Philippine migrant organizations do not seem to perceive migrants from other nationalities primarily as competitors. Instead, the Philippine organizations are seen as a role model in terms of organizational structure and lobby work. As a result, Indonesian migrants have established numerous organizations of their own and there are dense ties connecting the migrant groups. These NGOs and grassroots organizations are organized along ethnic lines but transnational in scope since their advocacy is directed towards the Hong Kong administration, the sending state and the "migration industry". But there are also umbrella organizations like the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body jointly advocate their rights. Finally, Hong Kong is also the place where the International Migrants' Alliance (IMA) was founded in June 2008 as "the first global alliance of grassroots migrant organizations".

These are indicators that some form of *diffusion, imitation* and/or *organizational isomorphism* ("grassroots isomorphism") must have taken place. The aim of this paper is to analyze these processes and discuss its consequences in terms of rights-based advocacy by looking at the three levels of migrant organizing in Hong Kong: ethnic-transnational, transethnic-transnational and global migrant activism. Apart from democratic norms, ideas and practices, existing cleavages and ideological differences between the groups may also be diffused horizontally (among ethnic groups) and vertically (from the local to the global level and vice versa).

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Shaping political subjects: migration, subjectivation trajectories and democratization

Because it is as much a social and moral travel as a spatial trajectory, migration tends to produce powerful individuation and subjectivation processes. Crossing heterogeneous universes of meaning - as in most migration trajectories -, and undergoing multiple accommodation and socialization processes in order to get a foothold within little known social worlds, support the development of reflexive capacities within individuals, whereby they might come to re-conceptualize the way they relate to themselves, subjectively, and to their original circles of belonging. De-centering, say the ability to compare and assess heterogeneous normative orders through their differences and similarities, in order to sort them and criticize them, might therefore be seen as a possible by-product of migration. As such, migration experiences may be viewed as instrumental in shaping reflexive subjectivities and critical dispositions, in which to ground liberal democratic practices. Yet, this relationship between migration and liberal subjectivation should not be taken for granted, as it can be barred by different sets of obstacles.

In Malaysia and Singapore, both major migration-receiving countries and both “illiberal democracies”, governments have framed finely tuned “capture apparatuses” as a mean of controlling numerous Asian unskilled migrant workers, in order to prevent their local emergence as political subjects. This has been done, mainly, by segregating spaces in such a way that migrant workers are prevented from encountering “the other”, from being exposed to different social formations, thus compromising the de-centering effects of multiple socialization and heterogeneous accommodation processes, typical of migration trajectories. Furthermore, the spaces where migrants are captured structure around blurred normative orders, which make it difficult for them to stabilize any sense of “normality”. As such, these spaces dispossess migrant workers from their ability to perform normative judgments. In turn, they can be seen as “spaces of alienation”, since disorientation deprive individuals from their ability to engage into meaningful courses of action, thus leaving them powerless.

Drawing on a twenty months multi-sited fieldwork dispersed between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, focused on Indonesian unskilled migrant workers, we will show how actual individual trajectories unfold within this transnational space. More specifically we will try to identify specific variables which might explain why, in these spaces, tightly controlled by states’ apparatuses, certain individuals do engage in individuation and subjectivation trajectories, whereby they develop stronger reflexive dispositions, while others do not. Moreover, we will try to assess the local effects of these distinct patterns in terms of democratic practices, both at home and in destination countries.

Indonesian Parties' Branches in Malaysia as the Agent of Transnational-democratization

Since 1997 Malaysia has become one of the largest importers of foreign labor in Asia in which Indonesia contributes to about 73% of foreign worker population there. The growing number of migrant workers makes the relationship between two countries closer, but sometimes vulnerable. The economic benefits gained from migration often overlap with human right abuses towards migrant workers.

At the same time, some Indonesian political parties establish its Malaysian branches in order to maximize the voters from Indonesian migrant worker population in Malaysia. In that sense, democratic reform in Indonesia in 1998 has changed the characteristic of political parties in Malaysia. Before reform, the most dominant and pro-Soeharto dictatorship party, Golkar, was the only party having office in Malaysia. Golkar and UMNO of Malaysia had a good relationship and working together on staff exchanging and leaders' regular meeting. In addition, both declared as "twin parties" referring their dominances and un-challenged positions in Indonesia and Malaysia. In terms of Indonesian migrant workers' protection, for the sake of good bilateral relations between two countries and two parties, Golkar did not blow up any cases related with migrant worker abuses.

After the 1998 reforms in which Indonesian turned itself into multi-party system, Golkar is not a dominant party anymore with only 15% of parliamentary seats in the 2009 election. The relationship between UMNO and Golkar is not so strong as before. Moreover, more than 10 Indonesian political parties have branches in Malaysia. Although the number of Indonesian migrant in Malaysia is only 1.2 million (compared to 230 million of Indonesian total population), the establishment of Malaysian branches is significant not only to get the voters, but also to get the sympathy from Indonesian's domestic politics. Since migrant worker abuses are televised and broadcasted widely in Indonesia, parties want to show that they are care with Indonesian interest.

Political parties, without ignoring their political interest, also actively criticize Malaysian authority on the migrant workers abuses. The more important roles are showed by Indonesian parties' branches in Malaysia. They do not only exist during political campaigns, but also intensively coordinate and lead the community of migrant workers. Some of them have crisis center to address migrant worker abuses. They also work in the front line to maintain communication and cooperation with Malaysian political parties. The new parties, such as PKS and PAN, prefer to work with Malaysian opposition parties, such as PAS and PKR, meanwhile UMNO changes its "ally" from Golkar to Partai Demokrat.

UMNO, ruling Malaysia for more than five decades, responds the trend of closer relations between Indonesian parties and Malay oppositions by changing their political campaign issues. In the past, UMNO vowed the "superiority" of Malay citizens over Indonesia migrant workers. Now, worrying the growing power of opposition, UMNO implements the "good neighborhood policy" in protecting Indonesian migrant workers. Indeed, PM Najib Razak visited a small town in Indonesia just to ensure public that Indonesian workers are well treated by Malaysian government. To sum up, in the Malaysian semi-democratic political system, Indonesian political activists in Malaysia do not only protect themselves from human right abuses, but also create the new phenomenon of transnational-democratization.

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