

Indonesian Migrant Workers in “East Asia”: Comparative Analysis and Agenda for Regional Governance

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Abstract

In the past three decades, the importance of migrant labor has rapidly grown in Asia- Pacific. The destinations of Indonesian migrant workers (TKI) have also shifted since the 1980s from the Middle East to Southeast Asia especially to Malaysia or Singapore, where the migrant labor has become indispensable part of the national labor force. The destination of Indonesian labor migration has recently expanded to Northeast Asia as well.

What is interesting in the current situation is that it is not only structural asymmetry of shortage and affluence of labor force and a considerable gap in wages and job opportunities that have produced this new flow of labor migration. What really matters more is a political will of sending countries, legal framework of host societies, transnational networking of employment agents or returnees from labor migration, which are also the background factors of producing the stream of labor migration. Therefore, along with the convergence of market economies and development of regional cooperation, it is likely that a new pattern of labor migration will emerge in the geographically expanding “East Asia” including Southeast and Northeast Asia, either based on the bilateral agreements between the governments or on the contracts of private agents and companies.

In the regional background mentioned above, this paper first discusses characteristics of the migratory system and recent policy changes of the Indonesian government concerning placement and protection of Indonesian migrant workers. Second, this paper explores the legal and social system of protection of migrants’ rights in Hong Kong which has a reputation as the most liberal regime in Asia to protect migrant workers’ rights. The comparative status of Indonesian migrant workers and a role of the migrants’ associations in Hong Kong will be mentioned. Third, the policy framework of restriction and protection under which Indonesian migrants are working is compared in some host economies such as Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan. Finally, in conclusion problems and an agenda for creating regional governance of labor migration in “East Asia” will be discussed.