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A Cartography of Overseas Indonesians: Preliminary Mapping of Diaspora Actors, Their Positionalities to the State and Implications for Protection

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Summary[2]

This commentary provides an overview of the evolution and landscape of the Indonesian diaspora, highlighting diversity of actors (in terms of demographic make-up and political inclinations) as well as acknowledging how our history of mobility has *predated* national history. Against the backdrop of a global trend, in which we see a proliferation of diaspora institutions, this mapping exercise contends that in the Indonesian case, contemporary diaspora engagement has been championed more by the society rather than the state. It considers the emergence of the Indonesian Diaspora Network as a diaspora organization, and the significant break it represents from previous diasporic animosity toward the state, and its evident national basis. An important reflection advanced here is how class

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factors in diaspora formation and engagement, which leads to the subsequent question of inclusion/exclusion. What are the limits of diaspora membership, and what is low-wage migrant workers' position in the diaspora? While diaspora engagement policies are mostly pre-occupied with attracting global talent (their capital, resources and network), this commentary canvasses early questions about the possibility of harnessing diaspora potentials in protecting migrant workers as one of the most vulnerable sub-population of Indonesians abroad. Protection efforts nevertheless need to take into account the workers' own agency and organization, which have become more pronounced in recent years.

Keywords: diaspora, IDN, migrant workers, protection

Traveling through History: From Ethnic and Conflict-generated Diaspora to Indonesian Diaspora Network

If the diaspora, as historian James Clifford (1993) put it, is a "traveling term", then state has certainly also journeyed along with it as the relations between the two evolve throughout history. Whereas in previous times, diaspora's relations with the state has tended to be tense and marked with contention, in recent times, there has been obvious attempt by states worldwide to link up with their emigrants and descendants. This is particularly evident in the rise and rapid proliferation of "diaspora institutions"—defined as formal state offices dedicated to emigrants and their descendants—since the 1990s (Gamlen 2019). Indonesia has also seemingly got on the bandwagon, with the establishment of a Diaspora Desk at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the issuance of the Presidential Regulation No. 76 Year 2017, which established the *Kartu Masyarakat Indonesia Luar Negeri* (KMILN). A more careful observation, however, would show that in the Indonesian case, increasing diaspora engagement within the past decade owes more to the diaspora community's initiative and activism, and less to do with the rise of diaspora institution.

Oft-quoted estimate puts the number of Indonesians abroad at around 8 million. Though this number could not be ascertained (partly due to the abysmal state of the national population and civil registration practices), it is obvious that very diverse groups make up the demographic of the Indonesian population abroad. Two features underlie the polyphonic composition of Indonesian diaspora, both relating to the contested nature of the nation-state itself. Firstly, the history of the archipelago's mobility is longer than the national history. Thus, rather than one national diaspora dispersed from an Indonesian entity, we observe the existence of diaspora groups with closer attachments to specific ethnic homeland, rather than the nation. Secondly, as scholars have meticulously documented, following the rise of the post-colonial state, various diasporic groups of Indonesian origins have formed to challenge the state. Driven by animosity toward the state (central government), we have observed the ebbs and flows of conflict-generated diasporas (Missbach 2018)—notably the Moluccans (van Amersfoot 2004), East Timorese, Papuans, and Acehnese. Curiously, the term diaspora is not habitually applied to a group of left-leaning Indonesians displaced by the events following the alleged coup in 1965, which paved the foundations for Soeharto's New Order. Perhaps to connote the ideological differences that underlie their impossibility for return, they have always been referred to as political "exiles" (Hill 2020; Akmaliah 2015).

Against the backdrop of the more long-standing ethnic-based and conflict-generated diaspora groups, the emergence of the Indonesian Diaspora Network is highly interesting. IDN stands in stark contrast particularly with the conflict-generated diasporas. While we can argue that both seek recognition,

with its firm basis in the Indonesian nation, IDN's struggle is for inclusion (or to some, even extension) as opposed to separation from the state. Aside of the absence of conflict as a defining marker in post-independence Indonesia, a major feature that further distinguishes IDN from other diaspora groups lies is its institutionalization, and its active engagement with the state. IDN has definite intended political agendas—which they pursue in a business-like manner within the corridors of government relations—namely, the advocacy for dual citizenship (Dewansyah 2019), as well as parliamentary representation. Of course, the fragmentation within IDN (the split between IDN Global and IDN United) and diversity of membership (marriage migrants, for example, comprise an important element within IDN) should serve to remind that just as the diaspora in general, IDN's nature is not homogenous, and that there are contending interests within the organization as a political arena. Nevertheless, its self-reference as a *nation*-based diaspora organization is clear.

Class and Diaspora Formation

The emergence of IDN also makes for a compelling case study, because it brought to the fore the question of definition—*who* is considered to be part of the Indonesian diaspora. On the surface level, the IDN—championed by then Indonesian ambassador to the U.S., Dino Patti Djalal—offered a very broad, and therefore unhelpful definition that even includes, "…foreign citizens with no ties to Indonesia, save for a great love they feel for Indonesia." It is not difficult to understand, however, the exclusion/inclusion actually at work—as Lim and Seol (2018) have noted, a growing body of literature has emerged to highlight "a hierarchy of nationhood," where members of diasporic communities are not viewed equally.

In the Indonesian case, there are intimations, from which we could surmise the centrality of class as a marker that defines diaspora membership. Foremost to consider is the U.S. as IDN's stronghold. The Indonesian migratory path to the U.S. is markedly different from other destinations (especially those within the immediate region). It is characterized by long-term, if not permanence of migration. Indeed, diaspora cannot be formed by those who cannot afford to stay long-term. In this regard, as van Hear (2018) asserted, "…reinstatement of class as a means of understanding how socio-economic and spatial mobility may combine to shape both diaspora formation and diaspora engagement. It suggests that the form of migration and its outcomes – above all, diaspora formation and engagement – are shaped by the resources that would-be migrants can muster."

As diaspora formation obviously requires more resources (financing), it becomes clear who gets to be included in the diaspora, and who does not. In this regard, a large group of Indonesians abroad are effectively excluded: low-wage migrant workers, whose migration comes with terms and conditions, especially in terms of *temporality*. A question that has been advanced by many is whether they are part of the Indonesian diaspora. Not considered as "global talent", they are commonly regarded as expendable labor. This is reflected in how standard work contracts limit period of employment to two years, after which they are expected to return. They are also subject to rights limitations, of which the most obvious (but largely unquestioned!) is the denial of their right to family unity. Although recognition of the family as the most important unit of society is enshrined in international human rights instruments, in actual practice, states only reserve the right to family accompaniment, defined as the right to bring family members to destination state (Nakache 2018), to some migrants, reflecting the prevailing differentiated visa/citizenship regime.

Relating to the second aspect that van Hear raised, i.e. diaspora engagement, unlike members of the IDN, migrant workers are also less able to engage the state due to their relative disadvantaged position. For obvious reasons, migrant workers are not in position (at least currently) to hold high-level events the way IDN has been able to with its Congress. Indeed, migration activists have pointed to differentiated treatment by Indonesian representatives abroad as signifier of who is considered to be part of diaspora and not. Unsurprisingly, these advocates were the first to perceive, and rightly critique the "class bias" within the IDN. Although efforts have been made to ameliorate this, and accommodate the inclusion of migrant workers in IDN's activities, it is clear that the macro-structures that set migrant workers apart from more privileged overseas Indonesians could not be easily, or quickly dismantled.

Solidarity Overseas: Harnessing Diaspora Potentials for Indonesian Migrant Workers' Protection

Studies on the potentials of the Indonesian diaspora, particularly from the policy perspective, are increasing. While compared to countries like India and China, current state's efforts to engage the Indonesian diaspora are relatively meagre, it is clear that the driving logic is that of tapping resources, rather than embracing lost citizens (Gamlen 2019). This development orientation is observable in the interest in drawing diaspora's capital, technology and network. The focus on more material goals begs the question of the possibility of also engaging the diaspora for more intangible objectives.

One urgent issue that needs to be addressed, is the protection of low-wage migrant workers. While Indonesia has started to deploy these workers since the late 1960s, institutionalization of mechanisms to protect them has lagged behind considerably. For a long time, deployment low-wage Indonesian workers was largely left to private agencies, whose records of misbehavior and transgressions are widely known and documented. Indonesia did not have a national regulation on migrant workers until 2004, and only recently revised the law through the passing of Law No. 18 Year 2017 to remedy earlier focus on placement (recruitment) of workers. Accounting for why protection of these workers has not been high on the government's agenda would require more space than this commentary could accommodate, but in short, we can attribute it to the workers' positioning as expendable labor mentioned earlier. Both with the Indonesian government and the Indonesian public at large, problems encountered by migrant workers appear to engender more responses about the nation's self-image, rather than genuine concerns about their well-being. A long-term national strategy currently pursued by the government is upskilling, i.e. the objective of sending more skilled workers in the future, reflects this predilection.

Though they are at risk of exploitation and rights violations throughout all migration stages, abuses most often occur during migrant workers' employment term abroad. In general, sending states suffer from evident limitations in protection beyond territorial jurisdiction (Ireland 2018), but in the Indonesian case, there is further concern about the domestication of protection (Dewanto 2020). In this regard, it is compelling to explore the possibilities of involving the diaspora in protection of migrant workers as the most vulnerable sub-population of Indonesians abroad. It is interesting to note here that the Indonesian diaspora's engagement with migrant workers far has tended to be episodic—re-surfacing usually around the times of the general elections (notably, in 2014 and 2019). Beyond this, more meaningful exchanges have not materialized, and it remains a question whether nationalism could still, and *should* serve as basis for sustained solidarity.

On a final note, the future challenge in involving the diaspora in migrant workers protection lies in advancing an emancipatory approach, that would allow for praxis, awareness and reflexivity of the power relations at hand. This is pertinent to consider, because in actuality, migrant workers, due to their experiences, are increasingly more organized than any other diaspora groups. Within the past two decades, migrant workers' unions have become more prominent, taking over a role earlier taken up by NGOs (a role more apt for them considering the representational issues involved). Their organizing has become more effective beyond borders, showcasing their agency as transnational actors who warrant serious attention.

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