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'Diversification' and 'Privatisation': Securing Insecurities in the Receiving Country of Malaysia

Christine B. N. Chin

Since the late twentieth century, the numbers of documented and undocumented transnational migrant men and women have grown exponentially in the labour receiving country of Malaysia. This article demonstrates that the Malaysian state pursues a dual-pronged strategy of 'diversifying' migrant nationalities and 'privatising' security to frame and manage public anxieties wrought by economic dependence on, and the fear and resentment of, low wage migrant women and men workers. The dual-pronged strategy foregrounds even as it collapses racial, gender and class differences between migrants of different nationalities. State pursuit of this strategy threatens to naturalise the dehumanisation not only of 'outsiders', but also those insiders who volunteer in the aggressive protection of their nation against migrants.

Keywords: Migrant worker; Gender; Race; Class; Transnational labour; State strategy; Neoliberalism

Since the mid to late twentieth century, transnational migration of peoples, especially for work and/or refuge from conflict, has given rise to migration industries characterised by the involvement of and linkages between public agencies and private sector firms (e.g. consulates, employment agencies, aid agencies, labour brokers, air/land/sea carriers). The facilitation of transnational migration then has become firmly institutionalised as a key economic activity in a changing global political economy.

At the same time, there is mounting public discourse on migrants as 'threats' to major receiving countries of the Global North and Global South.¹ The public has grown even more vociferous since a string of terrorist attacks in the early 2000s: in the US, for example, citizen volunteer groups have organised to patrol the territorial

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borders. For receiving states, securing their nation from 'infiltration' by potentially dangerous migrants has entailed, among other measures, the outward spatial extension of territorial borders (e.g. 'remote' border control via consulates and the establishment of immigration clearance posts at foreign ports of departure), the tightening of border control (e.g. more stringent entry criteria) and the intensification of internal surveillance (e.g. 'racial profiling' practices). Some aspects of security operations have been shifted to private sector firms, such as air- and sea-based carriers that must vet and ensure passenger eligibility. These measures bring into sharp focus, and subsequently endorse, the legal, political and moral right to question who belongs or can belong to the 'nation' (Bigo & Guild 2005; Adamson 2006). In brief, transnational migrants have become a central concern of and for receiving countries.

The institutionalisation–securitisation nexus exposes an important contradiction in this present era of national and global development underpinned by neoliberal ideology that calls for the state's retreat from the economy.² The construction and integration of free market economies via policies of economic privatisation, deregulation, diversification and so forth occur within an existing framework of 'nation states' that are premised on the distinction between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Hence, increasing free flows of information, capital and goods in and out of countries are not complemented by unrestricted movements of people. This begs the following questions: what perceived dangers do transnational migrants pose to receiving countries; what kinds of state strategies are pursued to control and manage growing populations of documented and undocumented transnational migrants; in what ways does neoliberal development ideology inform these strategies; and do the immigration control strategies affirm or challenge the dominant meaning and practice of 'border' and 'border control'?³

The present article offers an examination of state management of transnational migrants in Malaysia, where the country's population of documented low-wage migrant male and female workers has grown from several thousand in the late 1960s to approximately two million by 2008. Migrant workers now constitute one-fifth of the total workforce. Malaysia is one of the world's top receiving countries for undocumented migrants, second only to the US. Estimates of this population range from approximately two to four million people. If added to the number of documented workers, transnational migrants may well constitute nearly one-half of the total labour force in the country.

State management of the transnational migrant population in Malaysia echoes and strengthens the global trend of securitising migration. As the analysis in the present article will reveal, state management is rife with complexities and contradictory outcomes. The Malaysian state pursues a dual-pronged strategy of 'diversifying' migrant nationalities and 'privatising' security to frame and manage public anxieties wrought by economic dependence on, and the fear and resentment of, low-wage transnational migrant female and male workers. This strategy actively foregrounds racial, gender and class differences between migrants of different nationalities, even as

it collapses them into the category of outsider or 'alien'. Subsequently, the strategy facilitates state clarification of what is to be meant by Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian nation or 'race') in the twenty-first century and in ways that threaten to naturalise the dehumanisation not only of 'outsiders', but also those insiders who volunteer in the aggressive protection of their nation against migrants.

Bulwark for and of the Malaysian Nation

During the post-independence period of the 1970s, low-wage workers from the Philippines and Indonesia migrated to Malaysia for agriplantation and construction work as the Malay-dominated state embarked on its massive social engineering project. Introduced in the aftermath of the interethnic violence on 13 May 1969, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was a twenty year project designed to restructure the economy and society so as to level the playing field for Malays, the numerically dominant group in relation to the Chinese and Indian communities (i.e. to eliminate the identification of ethnicity with economic function and geographic location). The state's tacit approval of the presence of Philippine and Indonesian migrants in the country took the form of a refusal to acknowledge or regulate their entry and employment conditions.

However, in light of the history of interethnic contestations, non-Malay controlled labour unions and opposition parties led the public outcry for state regulation of migrants. The prevailing perception was that fragile relationships between the three major ethnic groups could withstand neither (allegations of) proselytisation by Filipino (Christians) in Malay (Muslim) communities, nor the assimilation of Indonesian Muslims (and, to a lesser extent, Filipino Muslims) into the Malay community. Crucially, state officials were accused of using Muslim migrants who also were co-ethnics of Malays to surreptitiously achieve their politicodemographic goal of increasing the overall percentage of Malays vis-a-vis Chinese and Indians in the country by counting Muslim migrants as members of the Malay community ('citizenship by census') and by allowing Muslim migrants to obtain legitimate citizenship documents under fraudulent conditions and/or refusing to address the growing trade in fraudulent documents ('citizenship by documents'; Sadiq 2005).

Even at that point, and despite the economy's growing dependence on low-wage labour, transnational migrant workers were perceived as a potential threat to polity and society. Official acknowledgment of their presence came finally during the economic recession of the mid-1980s. From then on, and as the state continued its massive social engineering project while gradually adopting a neoliberal development path, there have been a dizzying array of policies and regulations governing migrant recruitment, entry, employment and repatriation (Chin 2002; Liow 2003). Taken together, the policies and regulations on low-wage transnational migrant labour disclose a coherent dual-pronged strategy informed by the neoliberal principles of 'diversification' and 'privatisation', while exposing ongoing state construction of a

modern racialised, gendered and class-based Malaysian nation (Chin 1998; Healey 2000; Hing 2000).

In 1995, then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad introduced 'Vision 2020', the blueprint for a free market-based knowledge economy and society characterised by what he earlier called *Bangsa Malaysia*, variously interpreted as the Malaysian nation or the Malaysian 'race'.⁴ Given continued low wage labour demands of export-based manufacturing and agriplantation industries, together with that of Malaysian households, many more migrants from sending countries would be required to help realise this blueprint, whereas Malaysian men and women were encouraged to upgrade their skills. Migrant men came to dominate low-wage work in the formal economy, whereas migrant women were channelled mostly into households as domestic workers.

By 2008, there were approximately two million documented migrant workers with anywhere between two to four million undocumented migrants in the country ('Malaysia to launch major crackdown' 2008). These migrants come from neighbouring south and south-east Asian countries and as far away as from Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Low-wage migrants are employed in a variety of export (e.g. manufacturing, agriplantation and tourism/hospitality) and non-export (e.g. domestic service, construction, laundry, and welfare home) industries (Malaysia, 'Countries and Sectors' n.d.). Migrants perform the kind of labour that many Malaysians have come to acknowledge and reject as low-status, low-wage work.

Related to the exponential growth in and the diversity of migrant nationalities alongside that of economic sectors and industries are state efforts to streamline migrant recruitment, entry and employment. Since the 1980s, the state has entered into bilateral agreements (memorandum of understandings or MOUs) with sending countries, clarified recruitment and employment criteria and shortened application and approval processes. To ensure that low-wage transnational migrants are temporary or guest workers, immigration regulations prohibit the entry of migrant dependents, marriage to citizens and applications for permanent residency.⁵ The intent is to maintain a strict insider–outsider distinction: the stipulations render such outsiders simply ineligible for citizenship. Applications of new technologies (e.g. distinct identity cards with electronic chips) facilitate the state's assignment and verification of migrant identities according to immigration status.

Yet, these measures are seen to have failed in curbing the undocumented migrant population (e.g. those who entered the country without permission, those who have fallen out of legal immigration status, those who have been trafficked into the country), as well as asylum seekers and refugees from neighbouring south-east Asian countries (e.g. Rohingyas from Myanmar, Acehnese from Indonesia, Filipino Muslims from Mindanao). State elites continue to address the challenge of undocumented migrants via a 'search-identify-detain-arrest-fine-whip-deport' approach. Regardless of why and how migrant men and women may become 'illegal', they are constructed and represented in public discourse as threats to the nation. Policies or regulations that increase the numbers of undocumented migrants are largely ignored. For

example, in 2001, thousands of documented migrants from Indonesia became 'illegal' by parliament's passage of legislation that, overnight, decreased the maximum length of existing migrant work contracts from six to three years. Indonesian migrants were given three months to leave the country (Liow 2003, p. 50).

There has also been a major change to the state's visa application process for visitors to the country. In an attempt to bolster tourism-related foreign exchange earnings (encapsulated by the 'Visit Malaysia' slogan), the state introduced a program that eliminated the hassle of applying for tourist visas at Malaysian consulates: travellers can elect to apply for their visas upon arrival in Malaysia.⁶ When official data identified visitors who have overstayed as those primarily from Bangladesh, Myanmar, India, Nepal and the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Deputy Prime Minister insisted that there would be no review of the program because 'We want to make it as convenient as possible for people to visit Malaysia, particularly the genuine tourist, the businessmen and investors' ('Malaysia to drive out illegal migrants in Borneo' 2007). His statement elicits two interrelated points. First, official rationale for the state's refusal to adjust this program, even when confronted with the data, leaves the immigration doors open for some to enter legally as visitors but fall out of status once they work without state approval. Second, because the visa-on-arrival program affirms the state's explicit efforts to facilitate ease of mobility, especially of and for well-to-do visitor-investors, it also represents tacit construction and approval of a 'back-door' entry for 'guest' migrants to engage (voluntarily or involuntarily) in temporary low-wage labour while retaining the state's coercive power to detain and deport them when deemed necessary.

The news media, politicians and security forces, to be sure, are integral to constructing and maintaining a sense of crisis in public discourse on the burgeoning population of undocumented migrants. During the 1970s, 'irregular migrants' was the preferred phrase. This shifted to 'illegal migrants' in the 1980s and 'illegals' or 'aliens' by the 1990s (Spaan, Van Naerssen, & Kohl 2002). The all-encompassing noun of 'alien' signifies low-wage migrants (regardless of immigration status) as outsiders who do not have a legitimate place and space within the nation of Malaysia. Periodic and highly publicised security operations along territorial-maritime borders, in addition to raids of work sites, are carried out in the name of protecting the nation against migrants responsible for all kinds of social disorders (e.g. from assault, burglary and murder to 'theft' of women and the spread of communicable diseases; Crisnis 2005; Kaur 2005). Although migrant men are identified most often as perpetrators of crimes in the public domain, migrant women are victims of household employer-related abuse. From the public's standpoint, this is not unusual given the gender division of low-wage transnational migrant labour.

However, in recent years Malaysians want and are able to distinguish between migrant men and women from different countries: 'a Kuala Lumpur obsession is to guess the national origins of the servants, waiters, factory workers, and bus conductors labouring in the tremendously porous Malaysian labour force' (Williamson 2002, p. 412).

Diversifying Migrant Nationalities

The so-called 'KL obsession' is an outcome of the state's diversification strategy that was implemented in the midst of escalating public anxieties over the presence and activities of documented and undocumented Indonesian migrants. Indonesians constitute approximately 65 per cent of all low-wage migrants in Malaysia. Their relationship with Malays goes back to the pre-Colonial era of intra-archipelagic migration and ensuing shared ethnoreligious backgrounds. By the early twenty-first century, Malay perceptions of Indonesian migrants had shifted considerably from emphasis on historical kinship ties to that of the racialised outsider.

To reiterate, the racialisation of Indonesian migrants in public discourse began during the 1970s, when non-Malays believed that the state was intent on surreptitiously increasing the Malay population. Within two decades, and in the midst of sustained economic growth, the expansion of Indonesian migrant squatter settlements was read as an invasion of Malay spaces and livelihoods (especially informal economic activities). A conjuncture of geopolitical and socioeconomic forces by the early 2000s cemented the growing social distance between Malays and Indonesians: identification of Indonesians as originating sources of 'Islamic militancy' in south-east Asia (Liow 2003, p. 50–1) and especially Indonesian migrant riots (elicited by police brutality) at worksites and hawker stalls in Malaysia. The riots prompted state implementation of the 'Hire Indonesians Last' policy in 2002, which hastened the diversification of migrant worker nationalities while cementing the identity of Indonesian migrants as outsiders to the Malay community in particular and the Malaysian nation in general. Indonesians would no longer be considered co-ethnics. Although they are Muslims (i.e. members of a larger *ummah* or pan-Islamic community), Indonesians have become 'foreign' Muslims, or poor and dangerous citizens from a neighbouring Muslim country (Spaan, Van Naerssen, & Kohl 2002; Liow 2003; Crisnis 2005).

To mitigate concentration of, and dependence on, any one migrant nationality in Malaysia, the state approved a list of sending countries for each economic sector and corresponding industries, such as 'construction', 'manufacturing', 'plantation/agriculture' and 'domestic servants'. As published on the Ministry of Home Affairs website (<http://www.moha.gov.my/eng/3rdLevel.asp?tt=28contentid=366>), the table of economic sector–industry and eligible source countries is not gender specific, with an exception of the stipulation that only men, as opposed to women, from the Philippines are allowed to be employed in construction, manufacturing and plantation/agriculture. Presumably, migrant women of other nationalities can work in these industries, yet, in practice, these industries are dominated by low-wage migrant men from approved sending countries.

The category of 'domestic servant' is also not gender specific. This implies the eligibility of migrant men, although, in practice, immigration and employment regulations prohibit their entry and employment as domestic workers. Given prevailing wage levels, most migrant women domestic workers come from Indonesia

(RM550 per month without rest days, as per the MOU), even though employers are allowed to hire migrant women from the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Cambodia (anywhere from RM750–1500 per month with rest days, as per MOUs). State elites are in the process of reviewing and potentially approving the recruitment of migrant women from India, Nepal, Laos and Vietnam. The official reason is ‘because of increasing demand and the difficulty in getting domestic helpers from Indonesia’ (‘New Sources for Maids’ 2007). Nevertheless, a hierarchical ranking of domestic workers persists for Malaysian employers, with Filipinas at the top and Indonesians at the bottom; this hierarchy is shaped by a combination of factors, such as language proficiency, skin colour, perceived cultural traits and terms of employment.

Thus, the principle of economic diversification that is an integral dimension of neoliberal development has found its racialised, gendered and class-based expression in state management of low-wage transnational migrant labour. The state’s diversification strategy does not just reduce dependence on one or a few migrant nationalities but, importantly, helps delineate the material and symbolic boundaries of Bangsa Malaysia. Whether Bangsa Malaysia is interpreted as the Malaysian nation or Malaysian race, when it is juxtaposed against the population of low-wage transnational migrant labour, nationality and culture become synonymous, or are conflated with race. The economy’s persistent low-wage labour demands, together with real and perceived migrant activities in and beyond their workplaces, infuse Bangsa Malaysia with specific meaning: ‘The everyday presence of foreign workers, both in person and in the media, helps emphasise the comparative safety and power of simply being Malaysian’ (Williamson 2002, p. 413). Despite different ethnic origins and a history of interethnic contestations, to be Malaysian in the present time is to be the antithesis of poor (and even ‘backward’) outsiders, be they low-wage workers or stateless refugees and asylum seekers.

One salient outcome and challenge posed by the ever-increasing list of sending countries and economic sectors–industries is that migrant labour in general and men in particular are found in almost all types of low-wage work within the public domain. For example, low-wage frontline positions of trolley pushers, baggage handlers and cleaners at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport are held mostly by migrant men from south and south-east Asia (‘Foreign workers’ 2008). Similarly, in tourism-related businesses such as hotels and resort islands, low-wage frontline positions of bell boys, servers etc. are held by migrant men from south and south-east Asia, so much so that the Tourism Minister announced, in 2008, ‘We do not allow hotels to employ foreigners as frontliners for the simple fact that we want locals to be employed as many of them are jobless’ (Ramli 2008, p. 17).

Herein lies a major source of anxiety. Although the continued in-migration of low-wage workers from a variety of sending countries signifies the rise of a prosperous Bangsa Malaysia, the physical presence of migrants also informs ‘an apocalyptic vision of a Malaysia overrun by outsiders’ (Williamson 2002, p. 413). It should be said that, on the whole, the racialisation of migrants in Malaysia has not involved

explicit references to physiognomic differences per se. Yet, the Tourism Minister's statement exposes the extent to which migrants' physical characteristics and conduct constitute corporeal 'figurative borders' (Chang in Romero 2006, p. 449) and, hence, necessitate their removal from frontline positions in favour of those who look and act as if they belong to the nation. Physiognomic differences and mannerisms have become inextricably linked to their corresponding national cultural traits. The Malaysian public's association of specific threats with specific migrants is captured aptly in a text message that has made its rounds to mobile phones:

Get Vietnamese workers, dogs missing;
 Get Bangladeshi workers, Malay girls missing;
 Get Indonesian workers, money missing;
 Get Indian workers, jewellery missing;
 Get Chinese workers, husbands missing. (Wong 2007)

News media reports and public rumours of Vietnamese migrants kidnapping and eating household pets reached their apex when a member of parliament urged employment agents to 'educate migrant workers not to cook cats and dogs' ('Report: Malaysia' 2007). In the effort to detain migrant women—especially those from the PRC who reportedly engage in prostitution, drug trafficking and so forth—anti-vice squads would raid nightclubs in Kuala Lumpur and revoke their business licences. To protect their investments, other establishments began turning away customers who 'looked', 'acted' and 'spoke' in a manner similar to PRC women: 'It is easy to pick them out. They are tall and slim, dress differently and speak with an accent. Their manners are also polite compared to local Chinese women' (Kuppusamy 2006, p. 10). One establishment even posted a sign 'No women from China allowed' (Kuppusamy 2006, p. 10), as others asked for identification papers before they allowed women customers into their shops. When state elites proposed approving the recruitment and entry of PRC women for paid housework, some middle-class Malaysian women employers vehemently objected out of fear that their husbands would succumb to these women (Arifin 2007, p.16).

The presence of migrant men has also prompted focus of public discourse and policies on the need to protect Malaysian women. For example, Bangladeshis have been accused of 'charming' Malay women into marrying them, so much so that the state was compelled to ban their in-migration as workers for two years (some migrants then entered on student visas and proceeded to work without state approval). The Home Affairs Minister explained that: 'They have blue eyes and look like Hindi film actors and they create social problems here' (Megan 2006, p. 4). Constructed as key racial-cultural bearers of their community and the nation, Malay women are to be protected from perceived weaknesses that render them susceptible to these migrant men.

Two years later, the state's paternalistic stance towards Malaysian women was made explicit once again. The Foreign Minister created an uproar when he proposed that the way to address the rising incidence of Malaysian women (90 per cent of 119

Malaysians) being used as international 'mules' by drug traffickers would be to prohibit single women from travelling out of the country if they had not secured prior documented approval from their families: 'Many of these women [who travel alone] leave the country on the pretext of work or attending courses and seminars. With this declaration, we will know for sure where and for what she is travelling overseas' (Sennyah 2008, p. 1). His proposal had to be withdrawn amidst highly vocal criticism from non-government organisations (NGOs).

By approving the entry of low-wage migrant men and women from an ever-growing list of sending countries, the state inadvertently elicits more ways in which migrants are seen to threaten men and women citizens in particular and the Malaysian nation in general. In 2006, media reports that migrant workers (read: men) were the major cause of increasing crime rates (e.g. armed robbery and rape)—even though only 2 per cent of crimes involved migrants directly—helped fuel a controversial Home Affairs Ministry proposal:

Under the plan, the workers, mostly employed in the construction, manufacturing and plantation sectors, will be confined to their ramshackle quarters—known locally as *kongsi*—which usually consist of zinc roofing sheets and plywood and are located inside or near their workplaces. The proposed rule will apply even on their days of rest, when many off-duty workers head for the cinemas, shopping complexes or beer parlors. If the new law is passed, it will see them confined to their quarters unless they have express permission from their employers to leave their workplaces. Employers will also be required to keep a logbook detailing the daily movements of their foreign employees for spot inspections by police. (Kuppusamy, 2007)

The proposal was quickly rescinded amidst criticisms, especially from employers and NGOs. Largely missing in the heated public discourse is the unregulated workplace of the home, from which continued reports arise of employer confinement, surveillance and abuse of migrant women domestic workers.

Contradictions emerging from state efforts to dilute political, economic and social insecurities via its diversification strategy have instigated an even greater perceived need to strengthen protection of the nation against low-wage transnational migrant workers.

Privatising Security Operations

As the number of undocumented migrants grew in tandem with that of documented migrants, the state implemented harsher punishments for migrants, recruitment and employment agencies, as well as Malaysian employers who contravene recruitment, entry and employment rules. At the institutional level, coordination of various migrant labour-related functions conducted by different ministries and departments, such as Human Resources, Tourism, Labour and Immigration, was assigned to Home Affairs. This administrative move made the

subsumption of low-wage transnational migrant labour under the aegis of 'internal security' obvious.

In 2007, Home Affairs announced the drafting of a Foreign Workers' Bill that would authorise the Ministry to control every aspect of migration, from designation of quotas to migrant induction courses and surveillance:

The measures are said to be part of a major policy shift in the government's management of foreign workers from the Human Resources Ministry to the Home Affairs Ministry which, some critics say, blanket categorises migrant workers as a security problem . . . Under the proposed legislation, many functions traditionally handled by the Human Resources, Tourism and Health ministries will now come under Home Affairs, which oversees police, international security and the People's Volunteer Corps. (Kuppusamy 2007).

Although other ministries publicly questioned the relevance of this proposal to centralise decision-making power under Home Affairs (Cruetz 2007, p. 6), state elites had already applied their interpretation of the neoliberal tenet of economic privatisation to security operations. 'Privatisation' in this case is synonymous with the expansion of the institution and nature of citizen volunteerism made applicable to and for security operations against migrants.

The People's Volunteer Corps, or RELA (Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia), was established in 1972 (under the Emergency (Essential Powers) Act 1964 and the Essential Regulations 1966) following violent contestations between the ethnic groups. Its core objective at that point was 'to help maintain security in the country and the well-being of its people' (Hedman 2008, p. 375); that is, to assist security forces in ensuring public order and to serve as the 'eyes and ears of the government' (*berfungsi sebagai mata dan telinga kerajaan*; Malaysia, 'Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia'). By 2005, RELA was empowered to do much more than its original 'assist and monitor' functions.

Exponential increases in the number of undocumented migrants, along with sustained public discourse on the 'crisis' of undocumented migration in Malaysia, provided the state with justification to expand RELA's functions and power. The Essential Regulations 1966 was amended to give RELA the right to enter any premise in the public and private domain and to stop and search any person in any car, bus, van, train, boat and plane believed to be connected to undocumented migrants. Some RELA members who hold officer ranks are also authorised to carry weapons for use during their missions. In short, RELA is authorised to conduct armed, warrantless searches for undocumented migrants (*pendataing tanpa izin*) and without police or immigration supervision. This volunteer corps enjoys even greater immunity than police and immigration officials, given that its members are protected against any legal recriminations arising from their warrantless searches.

Housed in Home Affairs, RELA's membership is open to any 'healthy' Malaysian citizen above the age of sixteen (with the exception of, for example, those who already serve in the security forces or who have mental health issues)—members

come from 'all walks of life, including the unemployed, traders and farmers' ('Suhakam: Rela volunteers' 2007, p. 4). At the beginning of 2008, there were over 500,000 members (more than the total number of police and military personnel) in approximately 10,000 'platoons': approximately 450,000 members were men and 55,000 were women. With its gender ratio of 9:1, RELA is a highly masculinised civilian volunteer corps. Depending on the 'mission', training of members can range from a few days to a few weeks (Malaysia, 'Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia').

To encourage RELA, the state initially paid RM80 for the arrest of every undocumented migrant. This reward scheme was eventually replaced by an allowance given to every member because of the rationale that, in most security operations, RELA members tended to outnumber the arrests of undocumented migrants:

'Thus the final payment, when equally shared among those involved in each operation, works out to be very little. As such, the Government feels that it is fairer to pay RELA officers an allowance [RM4 per hour for ordinary members and RM5.80 for officers] each time they are involved in an operation, as acknowledgement of their service and contribution,' the source added. ('Hourly allowance to replace RM80 incentive' 2007)

Either way, the state has transformed its volunteer corps into an officially sanctioned, legally protected and financially remunerated vigilante 'strike force deputised to hunt down illegal immigrants' (Mydans 2007, p. 2). RELA's Director-General made the most explicit case for why citizen volunteerism should be read as 'privatisation': 'The government had, from early 2005, directed RELA to address the problem of illegal immigrants. This task is now RELA's "core business", aside from other activities' (Asmuni 2007, p. 26).

In 2006, the state 'requested [the media] to provide coverage on the official crackdown on illegal immigrants': RELA detained a total of 132,000 migrants, of which 25,000 were arrested in that year (Kaur 2005, p. 77). One year later, 180,000 migrants had been detained and, of those, 34,000 were arrested. The numbers are expected to be significantly higher by the end of 2008 because, according to the Minister of Home Affairs, 'We want to put fear in them [undocumented migrants]' ('Foreign Workers' Bill' 2007).

The privatisation of security operations in this particular manner (i.e. minimally training civilians, legally empowering them to conduct armed, warrantless searches and compensating them financially for doing so) cannot but promote the misuse and abuse of power (see, for example, 'Rela membership' 2007). SUARAM, a Malaysian NGO, wrote a memorandum to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia that documented cases of the physical and verbal assault of migrants, as well as theft of migrant possessions, by RELA members in the course of their security operations (SUARAM 2006). Although the Director-General of RELA said that 'We have stopped such volunteers from participating in raids', he also indirectly challenged negative reports of the conduct of RELA members by recourse to 'blaming the victim': 'If there

is co-operation between the illegal immigrants and RELA members during raids, then no problems will arise' ('Rela should not be disbanded' 2007). As if to further defend the conduct of RELA members, he also insisted that undocumented migrants have surpassed communists in becoming 'Enemy No. 2. Enemy No.1, he said, is drugs' (Mydans 2007, p. 2). RELA's security operations are expected to be extended to other states in the federation, as well as to additional sites, such as those in 'the building, housing and manufacturing sectors' ('RELA steps up Ops' 2007).

To meet its core mission of reducing the number of undocumented migrants in the country, RELA adopts a blanket approach that conflates those without legal work permits with those whose passports have been kept by their employers and those who seek refuge from traffickers, conflict and persecution. RELA raids are conducted on apartments, homes, workplaces, refugee camps and even settlements in jungles:

Terrorized by RELA, many of the migrants have left their apartment in the city and built shacks of leaves and branches in the surrounding jungle. But Rela pursues them here as well, the migrants say. 'Some jungle sites are periodically cleared by local authorities, the inhabitants are displaced, valuables taken away and at times shelters are burned to the ground'. (Mydans 2007, p. 2)

There were approximately 156,000 refugees and asylum seekers in 2008: 70,000 from the Philippines, 22,000 from Indonesia and 70,000 from Myanmar (US Committee for Refugees and Immigration (USCRI) 2008). Because the state refuses to sign and ratify the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees 1951, refugees are considered and treated as 'illegals'.⁷ Malaysia's foreign minister provided the official rationale for refusing to acknowledge their status and identity as refugees: many are economic migrants and are hence 'a burden to our society' ('Syed Hamid' 2007, p. 9).

RELA does not recognise UN identity cards given to refugees (while they await resettlement to third countries) and, during raids, members have been known to beat and arrest them: pregnant women and children are treated in much the same way as men. RELA has also sent trafficked Burmese migrant women and men back to the Malaysian–Thai border and handed them over to traffickers, who then either made the migrants pay more for transport back to their home country or took them back into Malaysia (for example, see SUARAM 2006). Implicit in the conduct of RELA raids, arrests and deportation is the kind of 'complexity reduction' (Trappolin 2005, p. 341) that is based on a racialised–masculinised norm of the 'illegal' migrant. Although the state has implemented its Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act 2007, which protects trafficked adults and children from prosecution and deportation (Selvarani 2008), it remains to be seen whether RELA members will consistently abide by the stipulations of the Act.

RELA has therefore become the state's private/citizen volunteer security force, operating without accountability in the name of protecting the nation against 'enemy no. 2'. Presently, RELA members are being trained to operate the country's migrant detention centres on a full-time basis ('Rela to manage detention depots' 2007). By transferring management of detention centres to RELA, the state naturalises these

centres as fully fledged 'zones of exemption' to which 'aliens' are physically and symbolically removed from the life of the nation (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr 2004, p. 34).

Discussion

In the present time, while territorial–maritime borders are increasingly made less pertinent by and for the free flow of information, goods and capital, the movement of people across and in politicised contexts of nation states elicit and foreground a perceived need to reaffirm the idea and practice of borders and border control. The phenomenon of securitising migration is most evident from strategies and concomitant measures taken by receiving states to protect their respective nations against a host of threats posed by documented and undocumented migrants: such measures are a reminder and an affirmation of the 'originary distinction' between insider/citizen and outsider/foreigner (Rajaram & Grundy-Warr 2004, p. 49). This point deserves emphasis because it elucidates a complex and contradictory relationship between the nation state and transnational migrants.

The securitisation of migration resuscitates what was acknowledged to have been integral to the emergence of the modern nation state but thought to have been purged effectively from its existence since the late twentieth century (Nicholson 2001). That the idea of 'race' and attendant race-making or racialisation processes based on physiognomic differences are no longer widely and politically acceptable today do not imply their permanent demise. The growing numbers of documented and undocumented migrants in receiving countries of the Global North and Global South, as well as the perceived intractability or immutability of 'cultural' differences (thus, the need to 'manage' migrants in one way or another by repatriation, integration, deportation etc.), are indicative of the resurrection of race, but in permissible ways in the twenty-first century public discourse, policies and regulations (Goldberg 2002; Chin, forthcoming). As the case of Malaysia demonstrates, the nation and its territorial–maritime borders are not neutral: they are (re)constructed, (re)enforced, protected and experienced, not only in racialised, but also gendered and class-based ways.

The presence of transnational migrants calling at the borders and/or those participating in formal and informal economies can and do challenge a receiving state's sovereignty with regard to control of territorial borders and/or economic dependence on migrant labour. However, at the same time, Malaysia and other receiving states are able to foreground and affirm their *raison d'être* of protecting what is meant by the prefix of 'nation' in its material and symbolic dimensions. To overtly and covertly meet low-wage labour demands of the economy while protecting the polity and society against perceived migrant threats in this neoliberal era, the state in Malaysia pursues a dual-pronged strategy of 'diversifying' migrant worker nationalities and 'privatising' security operations. The first prong mitigates dominance of one or a few sending countries in migrant labour flows and sectoral employment by expanding the number of sending countries, as well as corresponding

sectors and industries approved to employ low-wage migrants. In theory, the official list appears mostly gender neutral yet, in practice, migrant women are overwhelmingly channelled towards live-in domestic work in Malaysian households. The Malaysian public draws on what are considered national cultural traits grounded in intersections of gender, class and race to differentiate among migrant men and women. Importantly, to be a Malaysian is to be everything that is opposite of low-wage migrants because and despite of a diverse range of nationalities and their associated attributes.

As outsiders, the migrants' relationship with the receiving nation is evaluated along societal, criminological, economic and political axes (Karyotis 2007). Documented and undocumented migrants can be easily represented and treated as threats to the socioeconomic, securitarian, identitarian and/or political (Ceyhan & Tsoukala 2002) dimensions. State diversification of migrant nationalities in Malaysia, ironically, has had the effect of associating different nationalities of migrant men and women with different threats, ranging from dilution of a community's gene pool, shame by co-ethnics and the 'theft' of women, and even spouses, to criminal activities and the spread of communicable diseases. Economic downturns and ensuing higher rates of unemployment among citizen workers need not be the only cause of public anxieties that call for the containment and/or removal of outsiders in receiving countries of the Global North and Global South: the growing presence of transnational migrants brings to the forefront the question of who and what ought to constitute 'the nation'. Politicians, security forces and the news media in receiving countries are some of the major actors complicit in framing and fuelling public discourse of how undocumented and documented migrants can destabilise economies, politics and societies.

Whether those migrants arrested and held in detention centres/camps are documented workers who overstayed their contracts, refugees or asylum seekers, their unapproved (and hence unlawful) presence casts them outside the parameters of the state's responsibility and accountability: 'illegal' migrants, in effect, are detained within 'zones of exemption' in Malaysia and other receiving countries. State refusal to consider different causes and conditions of illegality exposes the extent to which this practice of 'complexity reduction' is gendered and racialised: the diverse causes of women's undocumented status (e.g. flight from abusive employers, conflict and violence), their vulnerabilities in centres/camps and their needs during repatriation/resettlement are neglected at best and dismissed at worst (see Valji, de la Hunt, & Moffett 2003; Yuval-Davis, Anthias, & Kofman 2005).

Embedded in the global context of neoliberal development, receiving states are also responding to the 'problem' or 'crisis' of migration by shifting some aspects of security operations to commercial interests, such as firms that develop, sell and/or operate advanced surveillance tools for external border control on behalf of receiving states and air- and sea-based carriers (in some cases, travel agencies), which are given the responsibility for determining travellers' eligibility. Carriers then purchase liability insurance from insurance firms that, in turn, build databases with biographical information, traveller profiles, arrest records etc. (Muller 2004). Security functions,

such as monitoring and vetting travellers, are now added to the everyday conduct of business. Although some may declare that the privatisation of security in these varied ways is yet another indication of declining state sovereignty, this perspective misses the point that receiving states can and will co-opt nationally based and transnational firms to help protect an implicitly racialised, gendered and class-based (and/or secularised) 'nation' against different categories of migrants.

Even more striking is how the privatisation of security has come to involve ordinary citizens/civilians in the name of their nation. The US may well lay claim to being the most widely publicised receiving country in which vigilante groups patrol the south-western borders and monitor businesses that employ undocumented migrants while municipalities pass legislation to deny such migrants access to housing, education, health and other social services. Again, some may insist that this phenomenon should be interpreted as a consequence of the receiving state's 'failure' to control the borders. This perspective also misses the point: the state can co-opt some citizens to participate actively in protecting a racialised, gendered and class-based 'nation' against unwanted migrants. At least five bills were introduced in the US Congress that, in one form or another, called for the establishment of a civilian border patrol corps (Vina, Nunez-Neto, & Weir 2006, p. 12). This mode of privatisation legitimises citizen participation in the active 'bordering' of the interior space and life of a receiving nation.

The practice of privatising security via citizen volunteerism has already been adopted unapologetically and expanded by the receiving state of Malaysia. The second arm of the state's dual-pronged strategy explicitly incorporates citizen volunteers in security operations by empowering and financially compensating RELA to search for, detain, arrest, temporarily house and, in due course, deport undocumented migrant women and men. Raids conducted by RELA signal that no space and place (public or private) within the nation is sacrosanct in its search for undocumented migrants. Therefore, 'border control' is no longer delimited by and restricted to patrols by security forces of territorial-maritime borders and surveillance clearance at ports of entry: RELA operations extend the idea and practice of 'borders' and 'border control' inward to the everyday life, space and place of the nation. Ordinary citizens and (documented and undocumented) migrants then cannot but experience borders, for example at their work places, homes, shopping malls, eateries, jungle areas, squatter huts, factories and construction sites. Complexities and contradictions emerging from the state's reinterpretation of neoliberal principles in implementation of its dual strategy have meant that securing the nation, ironically, is synonymous with securing insecurities for migrants and citizens alike.

Ultimately, the social construction and treatment of low-wage transnational migrant women and men together with refugees and asylum seekers as dangerous outsiders in this neoliberal era is indicative not so much of the need to protect the nation in receiving countries as it about the failure to protect the basic core of what ought to constitute any nation: its humanity.

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Notes

- [1] The terms of 'Global North' and 'Global South' are invoked here in place of 'developing' and 'developed' countries because the latter two categories are anchored in a problematic evolutionary foundation on which to situate countries. Instead, the terms 'Global North' and 'Global South' reference a divide based on the political economy of wealth. Although imperfect, the terms do not affirm a geo-evolutionary development continuum.
- [2] Neoliberal development is best evinced from the set of policy prescriptions that 'eliminate', 'shrink' and 'reduce' state intervention in the economy. For a more detailed discussion, see Rapley (2004).
- [3] At the outset, analyses on the state's relationship with migration may seem passé, especially given the extent to which processes, linkages and responses are transnationalised (e.g. from the emergence of transnational migrant communities to that of activism in human and citizenship rights for, and by, migrants; see Lyons 2004; Piper 2007; Elias 2008). Yet, whether the objective is to more fully understand new meanings of migratory experiences, especially from migrants' perspectives and activities, or to address conditions that give rise to and sustain different modes, patterns and outcomes of migration, one key goal remains the need to investigate why and how receiving states in the Global North and Global South securitise migration, particularly in this neoliberal era. Knowledge of the manner in which neoliberal principles are translated and expressed in terms of racialised, class-based and gendered state power can shed light on the larger context that shapes migrant experiences and identities in receiving countries, as well as potentially further identification of the nature and spaces of opportunities and constraints for activism on migrant rights at the local, national and transnational levels.
- [4] There is no consensus among scholars or politicians as to the meaning of the phrase. For more detailed discussion on the debate, especially between politicians in Malaysia, please see Cheah (2005) and Williamson (2002).
- [5] Even though the state ratified the ILO Convention 1997, which gives transnational migrants the same rights as Malaysian workers, it has refused to ratify the UN Convention on the Protection of Rights for All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families 1990, which provides for the legal rights of migrants without discrimination based on race, sex, religion etc. (see Piper 2004a,b; Kabeer 2007; Kaur 2007a).
- [6] This program is open to all foreign nationalities, with the exception of those from 25 countries (i.e. the majority of African countries, Israel, Colombia, Serbia and Montenegro)
- [7] Even though the state refuses to recognise the UN convention, it did work with UN Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) in the 1970s to eventually repatriate/resettle Vietnamese refugees who succeeded in landing on the shores, despite real threats of being shot down by the navy. Today, the majority of refugees in Malaysia come from neighbouring south-east Asian countries. Some refugees, such as the Christian Chins from Myanmar, have accused the state of discrimination against them (i.e. favouring Muslim Rohinyas from Myanmar and Acehese from Indonesia), whereas Rohinyas accuse the UNHCR of favouring Christian Chin refugees in the country (Kaur 2007b).

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