

Chapter 10

The Impact of Thailand's Revised Migrant Labor Policies: Progressive Reforms and Migrant Integration Under the Pheu Thai Administration

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the advanced legislative reforms enacted by the Thai government under the leadership of Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra and the Pheu Thai party. These reforms are targeted at enhancing the socio-economic integration of migrant workers from neighboring countries. The latest general election in Thailand was held on May 14, 2023 and Initiated in the wake of significant political change in 2024 under Pheu Thai Party, the reforms have facilitated extensions to work permits, streamlined the process for changing employers and introduced temporary stay regulations to legalize the status of migrant populations. This study employs Labor Market Theory to analyze the implications of these reforms on Thailand's labor market and focus on labor supply and demand, wage dynamics and the interplay between integration and competition of migrant versus local workers.

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INTRODUCTION

Thailand has long been a major destination for migrant workers, particularly from neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos. This is largely due to its robust economy, relatively higher wages compared to its neighbors, and persistent labor shortages in key industries such as construction, agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing, and domestic work. These sectors rely heavily on low-skilled labor, creating a steady influx of foreign workers seeking better employment opportunities (Huguet, 2014). However, Thailand's approach to managing migrant labor has evolved significantly over the years, shaped by shifting political landscapes, economic priorities, and regional labor agreements. The country's policies have oscillated between periods of regularization and enforcement crackdowns, reflecting broader concerns over national security, economic stability, and human rights (Bylander, 2019)

Thailand's labor migration history began with largely unregulated movements of workers, particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. During this period, undocumented workers played a crucial role in sustaining the low-wage economy, filling labor shortages in industries such as agriculture, fishing, and construction (Martin, 2007). Despite their significant contributions to the economy, migrants faced frequent discrimination and legal uncertainties, as successive Thai administrations alternated between tolerance and strict crackdowns on undocumented labor (Chantavanich et al., 2007)

In the early 2000s, the Thai government began to address these issues by introducing amnesty programs to legalize undocumented migrants and establish a formal labor migration framework. Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) on Employment Cooperation were signed with Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, creating legal pathways for cross-border labor migration. These agreements allowed migrant workers to obtain official work permits and visas, enabling them to work legally in Thailand under regulated conditions. Many employers bypassed formal hiring channels to avoid additional costs, leaving workers vulnerable to abusive conditions. Human rights organizations criticized the system for failing to address the root causes of exploitation, particularly the role of recruitment agencies that charged exorbitant fees for job placements (Huguet, 2014).

In the 2010s, Thailand intensified efforts to regulate migrant labor by increasing labor inspections and imposing stricter penalties on employers hiring undocumented workers. The introduction of the Royal Decree on Foreign Workers' Management in 2017 sought to formalize labor migration further by requiring strict compliance with work permit regulations. This law imposed severe penalties on both employers and migrant workers who failed to comply with registration requirements, leading to mass deportations of undocumented workers (Martin, 2007). While these measures

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