

Impact of Political Instability in Bangladesh on Labour Migration and Economic Productivity in Malaysia: A Sectoral Analysis

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of recent political instability in Bangladesh on labour migration to Malaysia and its broader implications for the Malaysian economy, particularly in key sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and agriculture. Through the utilization of secondary data from Bangladesh government reports, Malaysian government reports, and international organizations, the research identifies significant disruptions in the supply of Bangladeshi migrant workers, who are a vital labour force for Malaysia. The findings indicate that the political turmoil in Bangladesh has led to labour shortages in Malaysia's critical sectors, resulting in increased labour costs and potential delays in project completions. Furthermore, the study explores how these disruptions affect bilateral trade, with a particular focus on industries heavily reliant on Bangladeshi labour. The research highlights the need for strategic policy responses from Malaysia to mitigate the adverse effects of reduced labour migration, including the diversification of labour sources and the strengthening of domestic workforce capabilities. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of international cooperation in addressing the root causes of migration disruptions. This research contributes to the understanding of the interconnectedness of political stability and economic productivity in the context of labour migration and provides valuable insights for policymakers and future researchers.

Keywords: Labour Migration, Political Instability, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Economic Impact

Introduction

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Bangladesh has experienced significant GDP growth, positioning the country as one of the fastest-growing economies in South Asia (World Bank, 2021). This economic expansion, characterized by a robust increase in

infrastructure development, manufacturing output, and service sector growth, has earned Bangladesh international recognition for its developmental strides (Hasan et al., 2024). However, this impressive GDP growth has not translated into tangible economic well-being for a large segment of the population. The country continues to grapple with high unemployment rates, particularly among the youth, widespread underemployment, and escalating inflation, all of which have exacerbated income inequality and social discontent (Tasfi & Mostofa, 2024; Dhaka Tribune, 2024). The disconnect between GDP growth and economic well-being is a critical issue in Bangladesh's current political landscape. Despite the overall economic progress, many Bangladeshis find themselves excluded from the benefits of this growth, leading to increasing frustration and a sense of disenfranchisement (Miah, 2022). The lack of job opportunities, coupled with rising living costs, has put immense pressure on households, particularly in urban areas where the cost of living is higher. This economic disparity has become a source of social unrest, contributing to the country's growing political instability.

Recent months have witnessed a surge in political tensions, resulting in widespread protests and strikes that reflect public dissatisfaction with the government's economic policies (Chughtai and Ali, 2024). These tensions have not only destabilized the domestic political environment but also presented significant risks to Bangladesh's international relations, particularly with key economic partners like Malaysia, which heavily relies on Bangladeshi labour and trade (High Commission for the People's Republic of Bangladesh Kuala Lumpur, 2024). The economic interdependence between Bangladesh and Malaysia has grown increasingly significant, particularly in areas such as labour migration and trade. Malaysia has long depended on Bangladeshi migrant workers to fill critical gaps in its labour market, especially in sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and plantations (Anderson, Khadka, & Ruhs, 2023). These industries rely on a steady supply of affordable, skilled labour to maintain productivity and support economic growth. Likewise, Bangladesh benefits from the remittances sent by its migrant workers in Malaysia, which make a significant contribution to its economy and support millions of families back home.

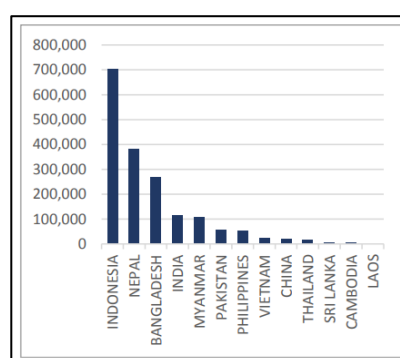


Figure 1: Number of foreign workers as per country

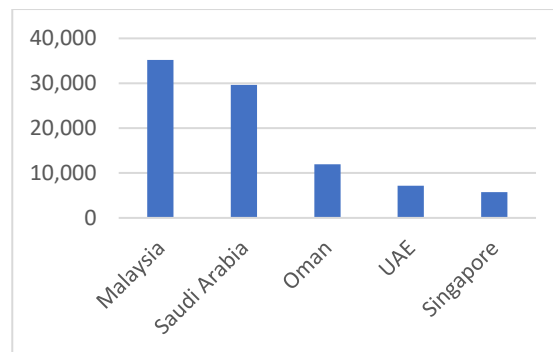


Figure 2: Top Countries Recruit Bangladeshi Workers in 2023

This paper has demonstrated that it is vital to understand the impact of political instability in Bangladesh on Malaysia due to the potential repercussions on labour migration, economic stability, and trade relations between these two nations. Bangladesh is a significant supplier of migrant labour to Malaysia, particularly in the construction, manufacturing, and agricultural sectors, where cost-effective and dependable labour is essential to maintain productivity and economic growth. Any political turmoil in Bangladesh could disrupt this labour flow, leading to administrative delays, recruitment challenges, and reduced supply, which could, in turn, result in labour shortages and higher operational costs for Malaysian businesses (Political Instability in Bangladesh: Implications for Malaysia's Labour Migration and Trade Relations, 2024).

Beyond labour migration, the economic relationship between Malaysia and Bangladesh is further undergirded by strong trade links. Bangladesh is an important market for Malaysian exports, such as palm oil, electronics, and machinery (Medina, 2021). Thus, political instability in Bangladesh may interfere with flows of trade, leading to supply chain delays, increased costs, and reduced reliability. Potentially, such disruptions could diminish Bangladesh's demand for Malaysian goods, which would have the knock-on effect of impacting overall trade volumes and economic stability in Malaysia (Bednarski et al., 2023).

Apart from offering insights for Malaysian policymakers, this research provides practical benefits to businesses, trade associations, and other stakeholders who rely upon on stable economic relations between Malaysia and Bangladesh. Additionally, the findings may inform policy at the national level, as well as reinforce the need for strategic measures, enabling Malaysia to understand challenges and minimise risks associated with Bangladesh's contemporary political environment. A strong understanding of these dynamics is crucial, not only for bolstering Malaysia's economic resilience but also for maintaining stability across the region in an ever more interconnected labour and trade environment.

Literature Review

Political Instability and Labour Migration

Political instability in source countries is a critical factor that drives labour migration. It exacerbates economic hardship, creates political uncertainty, and limits opportunities for potential workers. For instance, individuals in Nepal and Kyrgyzstan are compelled to seek employment abroad due to economic pressures and poverty, despite the psychological risks and uncertainties associated with such a decision (Sharma et al., 2023; Ünal, 2023). The situation in Brazil further highlights this dynamic, as deteriorating conditions drive workers to

migrate in search of better social stability and lifestyle opportunities, often to countries perceived as more stable, such as Portugal (de Azevedo, França, & Cairns, 2022). Similarly, in the UK, economic uncertainty and policy instability, exacerbated by Brexit, create complex deterrents for migration, impacting the feasibility of such movements (Romei, 2022).

The documented effects of political instability on administrative processes, recruitment practices, and the overall flow of labour migration reveal a pattern of disruption and complexity. In countries like Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, instability leads to a reliance on remittances and complicates the recruitment process. This contributes to a "brain drain" as skilled workers leave for more stable environments (Ünal, 2023; Duranowski et al., 2020). In China, labour unrest linked to political instability increases the likelihood of legal disputes and protests. This complicates recruitment and tightens regulations, further disrupting the flow of labour migration (Sumesh, 2020). The experiences of migrant workers from these regions emphasize the multifaceted impact of political instability. It highlights the need for more stable administrative processes and recruitment practices to ensure a more predictable flow of labour migration despite the challenges posed by political and economic conditions.

Political instability in source countries significantly influences the decision-making processes of potential migrant workers. It often motivates them to seek employment abroad, despite the various risks and deterrents involved. Moreover, this instability also impacts administrative processes and labour migration flows, resulting in disruptions, stricter regulations, and the loss of human capital. Ultimately, these factors complicate the management and sustainability of labour migration on both domestic and international levels. The collective findings from these studies highlight the importance of addressing the underlying political and economic issues in source countries in order to mitigate the adverse effects on labour migration.

Economic ties between Bangladesh and Malaysia

The economic ties between Bangladesh and Malaysia are heavily influenced by the reliance on Bangladeshi labour, particularly in the construction and manufacturing sectors. Studies by Khondaker & Md. Dali (2024), and Dolhan, Othman, & Idris (2021), highlight that this labour supply is crucial for maintaining Malaysia's competitive edge and supporting its infrastructure development. However, this dependency poses several risks, including potential disruptions in labour supply due to changes in migration policies or geopolitical tensions, which could negatively impact these critical sectors. Moreover, issues like human trafficking and the exploitation of Bangladeshi workers present additional socio-economic challenges, as noted by Dolhan, Othman, & Idris (2021), further complicating the sustainability of this reliance. Trade between Bangladesh and Malaysia, especially in the context of labour migration, plays a crucial role in strengthening their economic relationship. Hamzah & Sarifin (2020), and Rahman (2020), emphasize that this bilateral exchange not only contributes to the GDPs of both nations but also helps balance labour demands in Malaysia. However, shifts in global trade policies or regional agreements could disrupt this dynamic, potentially leading to stricter regulations on labour mobility and trade. Such changes could alter migration patterns, reduce the flow of remittances, and consequently affect the economic stability of both countries.

Furthermore, the potential for increased economic integration among countries in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as explored by Acar et al (2009), introduces another layer of complexity. While preferential trade arrangements within the OIC framework could strengthen economic ties, there is a risk that these benefits may be unevenly distributed, with more developed countries like Malaysia reaping greater rewards, while Bangladesh may experience welfare losses. This could exacerbate existing vulnerabilities in the labour market and trade balance, highlighting the delicate nature of the economic ties between Bangladesh and Malaysia. While the reliance on Bangladeshi labour and trade significantly contributes to Malaysia's economic sectors, this interdependence carries inherent risks. Potential disruptions in labour supply, human trafficking, and shifts in global trade policies or regional agreements all pose threats to the stability and growth of both countries' economies. To mitigate these risks, it is crucial for both nations to engage in dialogue and develop policies that ensure the protection of labour rights and the sustainability of their economic relationship.

Labour Market Theories

The economic ties between Bangladesh and Malaysia, specifically through the reliance on Bangladeshi labour, are intricate and diverse, greatly influenced by various labour market theories. These theories propose that the arrival of foreign labour, such as Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia, often leads to a decrease in domestic wages and intensifies competition for jobs. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in sectors like construction, manufacturing, and hospitality, where Bangladeshi workers tend to fill lower-level positions. The dual labour market theory emphasizes that these workers are more prone to underemployment and wage suppression, resulting in a potential loss of human capital and a decline in overall economic productivity in the host country (Hack-Polay et al., 2022; Amankwah, 2023).

Furthermore, the presence of foreign labour can lead to internal labour market churning, which can result in increased job instability and limited career progression for domestic workers. The constant redeployment of domestic workers, driven by the availability of cheaper foreign labour, can lead to lower wages and reduced productivity. Domestic workers may struggle to secure stable and upwardly mobile employment opportunities (MacKenzie & McLachlan, 2023). Moreover, in labour markets characterized by monopsony power, such as those seen in sectors dominated by large employers like Walmart, the presence of foreign labour can further suppress wages and diminish workers' bargaining power. This suppression is exacerbated when non-wage benefits are not adequately considered in wage-setting practices, which can have a negative impact on employment opportunities and economic productivity (Dube, Naidu, & Reich, 2022).

Moreover, labour market theories emphasize that the presence of foreign labour in Malaysia also affects how labour market information (LMI) is perceived and utilized by career practitioners and policymakers. The historical and political positioning of LMI can influence employment decisions and, consequently, overall economic productivity. As foreign labour continues to fill fewer desirable jobs, it may create differentiated effects on job prospects based on workers' qualifications, leading to increased employment insecurity and lower wages in domestic markets (Staunton, 2022; Lee, 2022). These dynamic highlights the need for careful management of labour policies to ensure that the economic benefits of foreign

labour are maximized while mitigating potential negative impacts on domestic wages and employment opportunities.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical research approach to examine the impact of political instability in Bangladesh on labour migration and economic productivity in Malaysia. The descriptive aspect outlines the current political and economic context in Bangladesh, alongside the historical relationship between the two nations. The analytical component assesses the potential impacts of political disruptions on key sectors in Malaysia, such as construction, manufacturing, and trade, by examining relevant data and trends.

Data Sources

Government Reports

This study relies heavily on reports from both Bangladeshi and Malaysian government agencies, including labour migration statistics, economic performance indicators, and trade relations data. Key sources include annual economic reports, labour market statistics, and trade balance sheets, which provide authoritative and up-to-date information on the current situation and historical trends.

Academic Journals

To support the analysis with theoretical perspectives, the study also leverages existing research articles and reviews from reputable academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Scopus. These sources provide insights into labour market theories, political instability, and their effects on migration and economic productivity.

Industry Reports

Industry-specific reports from bodies and think tanks focusing on sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and trade are also utilized. These reports offer sectoral insights and detailed analysis, complementing the broader economic and labour market data.

Data Analysis

Content Analysis

A content analysis is conducted on the qualitative data obtained from government reports, academic articles, and industry publications. This method identifies key trends, themes, and insights related to the impact of Bangladesh's political instability on labour migration and economic productivity in Malaysia.

Comparative Analysis

The study employs comparative analysis to examine current data against historical trends. This comparison highlights any significant changes or disruptions in labour migration flows, trade volumes, and economic activities, providing a clearer picture of the potential impact of political instability.

Trend Analysis

Quantitative data from the various reports are subjected to trend analysis to track shifts in labour migration numbers, trade volumes, and other economic indicators over time. This

approach helps to illustrate how political instability in Bangladesh might influence these metrics and, by extension, the Malaysian economy.

Findings And Discussions

Impact on Labour Migration

The political instability in Bangladesh has significant implications for labour migration to Malaysia, particularly affecting the supply of migrant workers who play a crucial role in sustaining various industries. The recent increase in Bangladesh's unemployment rate, combined with the economic challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has altered the migration patterns of Bangladeshi workers (Refer to Figure 3). The data indicates that while the overall unemployment rate in Bangladesh remains relatively low at 3.5% in 2022, youth unemployment reached 14% in 2020, reflecting a significant disruption in job creation, especially in rural areas (Refer to Figure 4). This instability has likely impacted the number of workers available for migration to Malaysia, where Bangladeshi labour is vital to sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and plantations. The growing vulnerabilities within the Bangladeshi labour market, including a high risk of automation and the pressures from a fast-aging population, further complicate the labour supply, potentially leading to a decrease in the number of migrants seeking employment in Malaysia.

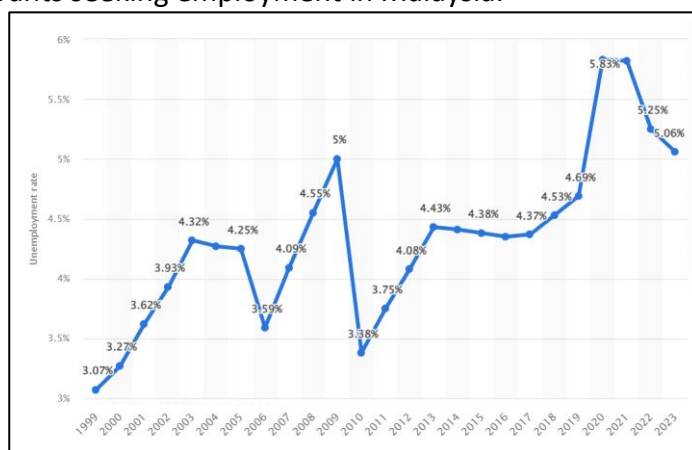


Figure 3: Unemployment rate from 1999 to 2023 – Bangladesh

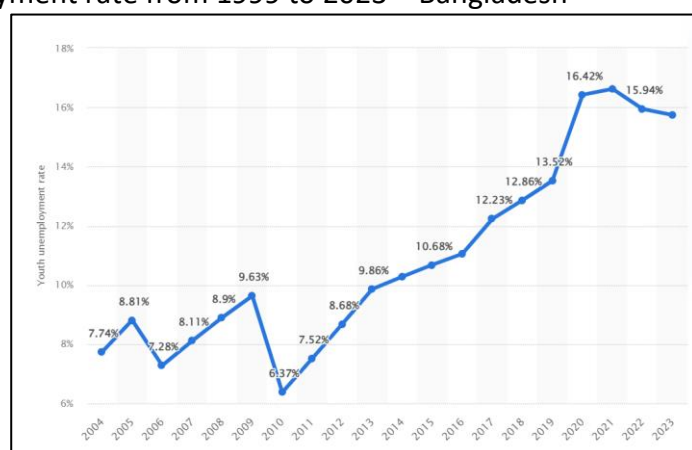


Figure 4: Youth unemployment rate from 2004 to 2023 – Bangladesh

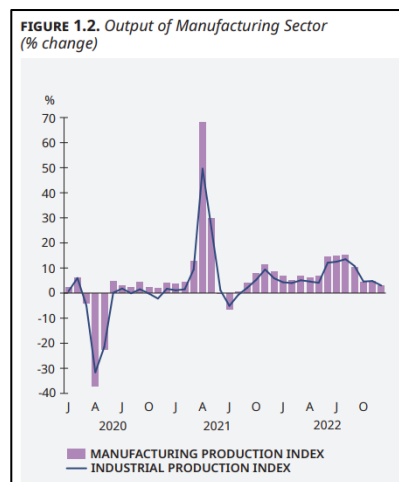


Figure 5: Output of manufacturing sector – Malaysia

Moreover, political instability in Bangladesh has broader implications for Malaysia's labour market dynamics, specifically regarding the use of labour market information (LMI) by policymakers and employers. The changing availability of Bangladeshi workers, combined with the historical and political context of LMI, may impact how employment decisions are guided by career practitioners in Malaysia. The dual labour market theory suggests that foreign labour often fills lower-tier positions, potentially leading to lower wages and increased job insecurity among domestic workers. With Malaysia facing labour shortages, particularly in key sectors such as construction and manufacturing, there may be a need for policy adjustments to address these challenges (See Figure 5). This could involve revising wage policies, strengthening worker protections, and exploring alternative sources of labour to mitigate the negative effects of reduced migration from Bangladesh.

Sectoral Impacts

The construction, manufacturing, and plantation sectors in Malaysia are particularly vulnerable to labour shortages due to a reduced inflow of Bangladeshi workers. In 2023, the Malaysian construction sector was expected to grow by 6.1%, driven by ongoing infrastructure projects and residential development. However, the decrease in labour supply from Bangladesh could lead to increased labour costs, project completion delays, and a slowdown in sector growth. Similarly, the manufacturing sector, projected to expand by 3.9% in 2023, could face significant challenges due to labour shortages. The reliance on Bangladeshi workers for both export-oriented and domestic industries means that any disruption in labour supply could result in production slowdowns, increased operational costs, and reduced competitiveness in the global market. The plantation sector, another key area dependent on Bangladeshi labour, may also experience decreased productivity and higher labour costs, potentially impacting Malaysia's agricultural output and export capacity.

In response to these challenges, Malaysia may need to consider strategic shifts in its labour and economic policies to ensure the continued stability of its key sectors. This could involve increasing investment in automation and technology to reduce reliance on manual labour, particularly in industries like manufacturing and plantations. Additionally, Malaysia may need to enhance its domestic labour market by investing in skills development and training programs to prepare local workers for roles traditionally filled by migrant labour. Policymakers could also explore bilateral agreements with other countries to diversify the

sources of foreign labour, reducing the risks associated with over-reliance on any single country, such as Bangladesh. These strategic shifts would not only help stabilize Malaysia's economy in the face of labour shortages but also strengthen its resilience against future disruptions in labour migration.

Trade Disruptions

The disruptions in labour migration not only pose a challenge for domestic sectors in Malaysia but also have broader implications for the economic ties between Bangladesh and Malaysia. The decrease in migrant workers could result in a decline in remittances sent back to Bangladesh, which would have an impact on the country's economy. Bangladesh heavily relies on these inflows for domestic consumption and investment (see Figure 6). Moreover, the political instability in Bangladesh and the resulting labour shortages in Malaysia could strain bilateral relations. Both countries may seek to renegotiate labour agreements or explore alternative sources of labour, potentially leading to trade disruptions. Sectors in which Bangladeshi workers play a crucial role in production processes, such as Malaysia's palm oil industry, may face challenges in maintaining export levels. This, in turn, would affect trade balances and economic growth in both countries.

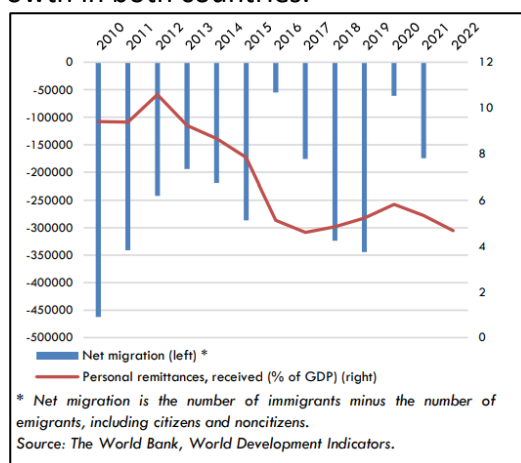


Figure 6: Net migration and personal remittance in Bangladesh, 2010-2022

This discussion emphasizes the need to closely monitor the current political situation in Bangladesh and how it may affect Malaysia's economy. As the political landscape in Bangladesh continues to change, it is essential for Malaysia to stay vigilant in assessing the risks and opportunities related to labour migration. Continuous dialogue between the two countries, along with proactive policy measures, will be crucial in enabling Malaysia to effectively address the challenges of reduced labour migration while sustaining economic growth and stability. This important discussion emphasizes the importance of a comprehensive and flexible approach to managing the economic relationship between Bangladesh and Malaysia, with a focus on protecting the long-term economic interests of both countries.

Conclusion And Recommendations

The political instability in Bangladesh has had a significant impact on labour migration to Malaysia. This has resulted in potential labour shortages and increased costs in important sectors like construction, manufacturing, and plantations. These disruptions have not only strained Malaysia's domestic economic productivity, but have also exposed vulnerabilities in

the economic relationship between the two countries. To address these challenges, Malaysia should consider making strategic adjustments to its labour policies, explore alternative sources of foreign labour, and invest in developing its domestic workforce. This will help ensure economic stability in the face of ongoing uncertainties.

Malaysian policymakers should prioritize diversifying the sources of foreign labour to reduce dependency on any single country, such as Bangladesh. By establishing bilateral agreements with other nations in the Asia-Pacific region or beyond, a steady flow of migrant workers can be maintained. This will ensure that critical industries like construction and manufacturing remain productive. Additionally, it would be beneficial to revisit and potentially revise wage policies to attract more domestic workers to sectors currently reliant on foreign labour. This will help alleviate some of the pressures caused by reduced migration from Bangladesh.

To address labour shortages caused by decreased migration, policymakers should promote the adoption of automation and advanced technologies in labour-intensive sectors. Investing in technology can help decrease reliance on manual labour, especially in industries such as manufacturing and plantations. Providing incentives for companies to modernize their operations and implement digital solutions would not only improve productivity, but also enhance Malaysia's competitiveness in the global market. This would make the country less vulnerable to fluctuations in foreign labour supply.

Strengthening the domestic labour market is crucial in order to reduce reliance on foreign workers. Policymakers should prioritize investment in skills development and training programs, with a particular focus on the youth and unemployed population. By providing local workers with the necessary skills to fill positions typically taken by migrant labour, Malaysia can establish a workforce that is more resilient and self-sustaining. Additionally, enhancing career opportunities and working conditions in sectors such as construction and manufacturing could further incentivize greater domestic participation.

As Malaysia faces the challenges brought about by political instability in Bangladesh, it is vital to prioritize open communication and cooperation between the two countries. Policymakers should regularly engage in dialogue with their counterparts in Bangladesh to effectively address concerns regarding labour migration, trade, and economic cooperation. By strengthening diplomatic ties and exploring collaborative initiatives, both nations can effectively manage the risks associated with labour disruptions while also fostering long-term economic collaboration.

Future research should prioritize exploring the long-term effects of reduced labour migration on Malaysia's economic sectors and labour market dynamics. Conducting comparative studies with other countries facing similar challenges could yield valuable insights into effective policy measures. Moreover, studying the role of automation and technology in alleviating labour shortages would be crucial for guiding future investments. Lastly, investigating the socio-economic outcomes for both domestic and foreign workers in Malaysia can provide a deeper understanding of the broader implications of labour migration policies, thus contributing to more informed decision-making in the future.

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