

The Lifting of the Moratorium and Indonesia-Saudi Arabia Labor Migration Diplomacy: Efforts for Protection and Strategic Partnership

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Abstract. Labor migration has long been a central pillar in Indonesia–Saudi Arabia relations, particularly through the placement of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in the domestic sector. However, rising cases of exploitation and weak legal protection prompted the Indonesian government to impose a moratorium in 2015, which had both protective and economic consequences. This study examines the relevance of lifting the moratorium as a diplomatic instrument, both to safeguard PMI and to strengthen the bilateral strategic partnership. Employing a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach, the analysis draws on neoliberal institutionalism and human security frameworks to assess the policy shift. The findings indicate that the discourse on lifting the moratorium is primarily driven by economic interests through remittances, Saudi Arabia’s continuing demand for domestic labor, and political efforts to normalize labor relations. Thus, the lifting of the moratorium can only be deemed diplomatically legitimate if accompanied by consistent and effective implementation of migrant worker protection mechanisms.

Keywords: labor migration diplomacy, Indonesia–Saudi Arabia relations, moratorium, migrant worker protection, bilateral cooperation, human security.

1 Introduction

Labor migration has long been a fundamental pillar in Indonesia–Saudi Arabia relations. For decades, Saudi Arabia has served as a primary destination for Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI), particularly those employed in the domestic sector. As Kusumawati (2025) highlights, Saudi Arabia has consistently been the main destination country for Indonesian workers, especially in domestic employment. The placement of Indonesian workers in Saudi Arabia began to show significant growth in the early 1980s (Hidayat, 2014). This large-scale migration has shaped labor cooperation between the two countries, not only generating economic impacts through remittances that contribute to national revenue and sustain millions of families in Indonesia, but also intertwining with foreign policy, citizen protection, and Indonesia’s international image. Thus, labor migration should not be understood merely as a transnational

economic exchange, but also as an arena of diplomacy that involves human security, the protection of human rights, and the management of bilateral relations.

Since 2015, however, labor relations between the two countries have entered a critical phase. Prior to this, Indonesia had implemented a “soft moratorium,” followed by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that failed to produce substantive outcomes (Septian, Ginanjar, & Akbar, 2024). The Indonesian government formally imposed a moratorium on the deployment of domestic workers to Saudi Arabia in response to increasing cases of violence, exploitation, and weak legal protection. This policy was institutionalized through Minister of Manpower Decree No. 260/2015, which prohibited the placement of Indonesian migrant workers with individual employers in 19 Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia. The moratorium has since functioned as a strategic foreign policy instrument: on the one hand, it demonstrates the state’s commitment to protecting its citizens, yet on the other, it brings socio-economic consequences in the form of job losses and declining remittances.

After nearly a decade, in March 2025 the Indonesian government announced its plan to lift the moratorium, targeting implementation by June 2025. Yet, as of August 2025, the policy remains unrealized. The debate surrounding this prospective policy shift signals a new phase in Indonesia–Saudi Arabia labor diplomacy. A critical question arises: is the lifting of the moratorium primarily aimed at accommodating Saudi Arabia’s labor market needs, or does it represent a genuine diplomatic achievement by Indonesia in securing a stronger framework of worker protection?

From a theoretical standpoint, the policy shift can be analyzed through the lens of neoliberal institutionalism, which underscores the role of institutions and international agreements in fostering order and mutual benefits. Keohane (1977) conceptualizes cooperation in international relations as a condition marked by interdependence among both state and non-state actors, where the actions of one actor inevitably affect others. Further, Keohane (1982) emphasizes that cooperation is sustainable only when actors are willing to address shared problems and commit to avoiding opportunistic behavior that undermines stability.

In this regard, bilateral agreements between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia are crucial instruments for reducing power asymmetry and ensuring legal protection for workers. At the same time, a *human security* approach offers a critical perspective: the essence of labor migration policy should not be limited to economic interests but must prioritize the safety, dignity, and welfare of those working abroad. Thus, the lifting of the moratorium can only be deemed successful if protection mechanisms are effectively enforced, rather than remaining symbolic or administrative in nature.

The complexity deepens when viewed through the domestic dynamics of both countries. Their relationship is one of mutual dependency: Indonesia, as a labor-sending country, seeks employment opportunities abroad, while Saudi Arabia requires domestic workers (Septian, Ginanjar, & Akbar, 2024). For Indonesia, domestic economic pressures and limited job opportunities drive the search for broader overseas labor markets. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is implementing its Vision 2030, which emphasizes economic transformation and workforce diversification. Consequently, the trajectory of Indonesia–Saudi labor migration policy is shaped by the strategic priorities of both

sides: Indonesia's agenda of citizen protection and Saudi Arabia's labor needs to support national development.

Nonetheless, a crucial dilemma persists: the effectiveness of labor migration policy following the lifting of the moratorium will depend heavily on its actual implementation. Past experiences demonstrate that many cases of violence against Indonesian workers stem not solely from regulatory gaps, but from weak law enforcement and limited commitment by authorities in the host country. The pressing questions, therefore, are whether the new bilateral instruments will ensure substantive improvements, and whether the lifting of the moratorium will mark a genuine turning point in strengthening worker protection and deepening strategic partnership, or merely repeat the same cycle of vulnerabilities.

This paper is guided by the central question: Is the lifting of the moratorium still relevant as a diplomatic instrument for both protecting Indonesian migrant workers and strengthening Indonesia-Saudi Arabia strategic partnership? To address this question, the analysis will examine the driving factors behind the policy shift, assess the effectiveness of the negotiated protection instruments, and explore the broader strategic implications for bilateral relations.

2 Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive-analytical approach to examine Indonesia's policy on lifting the moratorium on migrant worker placement in Saudi Arabia and its implications for labor diplomacy. A qualitative design is appropriate since labor migration involves not only economic indicators but also political discourse, policy complexity, and human rights dimensions (Creswell, 2009).

The data are drawn from secondary sources, including government regulations, bilateral memoranda of understanding, reports from international organizations, peer-reviewed publications, and credible media coverage. Document analysis is employed to examine legal frameworks, cooperation agreements, and public debates, enabling the identification of policy drivers, strategic interests, and governance challenges.

The analysis is guided by two theoretical perspectives. Neoliberal Institutionalism explains how bilateral cooperation shapes institutionalized governance, while the Human Security framework evaluates whether policies effectively ensure the rights and safety of migrant workers. A thematic analysis organizes findings into three central themes: legal protection, economic diplomacy, and strategic partnership. This approach allows the study to move beyond description toward interpreting the moratorium's lifting as both a diplomatic instrument and a test of Indonesia's commitment to worker protection.

3 Discussion and Findings

3.1 The Dynamics of Indonesian Labor Migration to Saudi Arabia

The migration of Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) to Saudi Arabia represents a transnational phenomenon shaped not only by economic factors but also by political, social, cultural, and religious dimensions. The historical diplomatic relations between the two countries laid the foundation for the significant labor migration flow. Saudi Arabia was among the first states to recognize Indonesia’s sovereignty, on 24 November 1947. The establishment of the Indonesian Representative Office in Jeddah in 1950—later elevated to the status of Embassy in 1964—along with the Consulate General, strengthened diplomatic networks and facilitated cooperation in various sectors, including labor migration (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia; Septian, Ginanjar, & Akbar, 2024).

Indonesia and Saudi Arabia maintain strategic reciprocal relations. Saudi Arabia serves as a primary destination for hajj pilgrimage, PMI deployment, and potential economic partnerships, while Indonesia contributes significantly through hajj-related foreign exchange, labor supply, and cross-sectoral cooperation opportunities (Bhaskara, 2018). The majority of Indonesian migrant workers deployed to Saudi Arabia are concentrated in the domestic sector, including housemaids and elderly caregivers. Data from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI) indicate that prior to the 2015 moratorium, more than 70% of PMI placements in Saudi Arabia were in this sector.

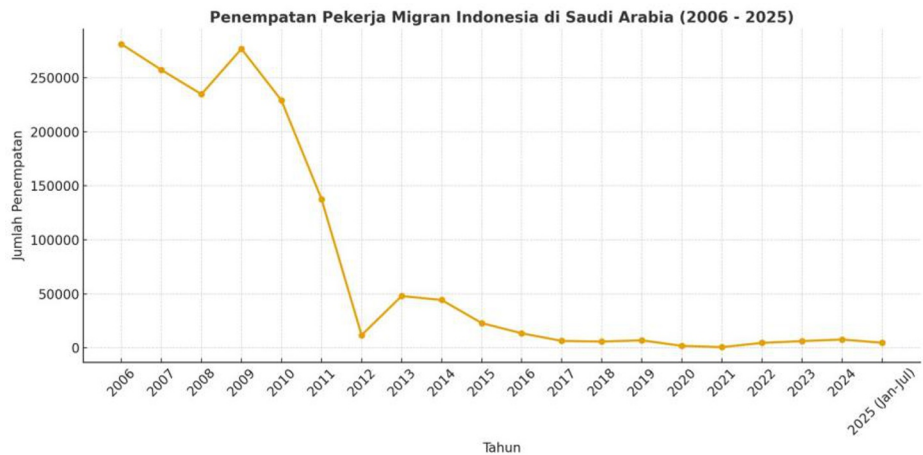


Fig. 1. Placement of Indonesian Migrant Workers in Saudi Arabia, 2006-2025 (January-July). Source: Author’s calculation based on data from KP2MI RI.

The deployment of Indonesian migrant workers to Saudi Arabia has shown fluctuating patterns, closely linked to governmental policies in both countries as well as broader social dynamics. As shown in Fig.1, between 2006 and 2010, PMI placement

reached its peak, consistently exceeding 200,000 workers annually. However, since 2011, the numbers have declined sharply.

A critical turning point occurred in 2011 with the execution of Ruyati, an Indonesian domestic worker, without prior notification to the Indonesian government. As Lasim (2022) argues, the mutually dependent relationship between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia has often been marked by tensions, one of which was the execution of Ruyati. This incident triggered a policy reassessment on labor protection and prompted Indonesia to impose a moratorium on sending migrant workers to Saudi Arabia. The case generated strong diplomatic pressure and public outcry. In response, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono enacted a soft moratorium on the deployment of domestic workers to Saudi Arabia in 2011, signaling a policy shift from supply-driven migration—characterized by massive outflows to meet foreign labor demand—toward a more protective approach.

Normalization efforts followed, including the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Placement and Protection of Domestic Workers in 2014. However, the implementation of this MoU encountered serious challenges, particularly in terms of monitoring and enforcement, raising concerns regarding its overall effectiveness.

Labor migration to Saudi Arabia has had a profound impact on Indonesia's economy. Remittances sent by Indonesian migrant workers constitute a major source of foreign exchange. According to Bank Indonesia, remittances from Saudi Arabia rank among the highest compared to other destination countries, making significant contributions to household economies, particularly in migrant-sending regions such as West Java, Central Java, West Nusa Tenggara, and parts of Sulawesi.

Beyond economic considerations, cultural and religious dimensions play a pivotal role. Indonesia–Saudi Arabia relations are underpinned by their shared Muslim-majority identity, with Saudi Arabia serving as the primary destination for hajj and umrah pilgrims who generate substantial foreign exchange, as well as a hub for Indonesian students pursuing Islamic studies (Lasim, 2022). Religious affinity enhances Saudi Arabia's attractiveness as a labor destination, perceived not only as financially rewarding but also spiritually meaningful. For many Indonesian workers, employment in Saudi Arabia is regarded as a special opportunity due to its proximity to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. This perception strengthens Saudi Arabia's image as an "honorable destination" for labor migration and reinforces social and cultural networks that sustain migration flows.

Nevertheless, Indonesian labor migration to Saudi Arabia remains fraught with protection challenges. The domestic sector, being informal and closed, renders migrant workers—particularly women—highly vulnerable to exploitation. Human Rights Watch (2015) documented numerous cases of abuse, including sexual violence, which often went unresolved due to a legal system in Saudi Arabia that tends to favor employers.

These vulnerabilities highlight the asymmetrical power relations embedded in the employer–migrant worker relationship. Limited access to legal protection, weak monitoring mechanisms, and dependence on recruitment agencies further exacerbate the precarious position of Indonesian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia.

In sum, the dynamics of Indonesian labor migration to Saudi Arabia reflect a complex interplay of economic, social, cultural, and political factors. On one hand, migration generates substantial economic benefits for both the state and migrant households. On the other hand, the structural vulnerabilities faced by Indonesian migrant workers, particularly in the domestic sector, underscore the urgent need for more comprehensive policies and more effective protection mechanisms.

3.2 The 2015 Moratorium

The implementation of the 2015 moratorium on the deployment of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) to Saudi Arabia can be understood as the culmination of longstanding concerns over migrant worker protection. This policy did not emerge as a sudden decision; rather, it was a response to the escalating violations of human rights experienced by Indonesian workers, particularly those employed in the domestic sector. The phenomenon of moratoriums is not new in the context of international migration. Countries with significant migrant worker populations have often used such measures as instruments of politics and diplomacy, particularly as a form of protest against the mistreatment of their citizens in host countries (Naerssen & Asis, 2015).

Since the early 2010s, the number of complaints regarding the plight of Indonesian workers in Saudi Arabia steadily increased. Recurrent violations—including physical abuse, excessive working hours, unpaid wages, and even criminalization of workers—became persistent issues. The situation reached a crisis point when several fatal cases, including the execution of Indonesian workers, gained wide international media attention, such as coverage by Al Jazeera in 2015. Official data recorded at least 630 cases involving Indonesian workers in Saudi Arabia as of August 2014 (Khaitam, 2014). These figures underscored the weakness of the existing protection system and demonstrated the limited effectiveness of Indonesia's diplomatic efforts. The IOM Indonesia (2016) further confirmed that violations persisted despite earlier placement restrictions.

Prior to the full moratorium, the government had experimented with a so-called “soft moratorium.” Under President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono in 2011, this policy was first applied to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and Syria. During President Joko Widodo's administration, the scope expanded to 19 countries in the Middle East (Lasim, 2022). The measures included limiting sectors of employment and tightening placement mechanisms. Diplomatic initiatives were also pursued, such as the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Saudi Arabia in 2014, focusing on the protection of domestic workers. However, the MoU's implementation failed to produce significant improvements in reducing rights violations.

In 2015, the government ultimately adopted a more decisive approach by imposing a total moratorium. Through Ministerial Decree No. 260/2015, Indonesia officially suspended the deployment of migrant workers to 21 Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia (Yuanita, 2016). This policy was positioned not only as a protective measure for migrant workers but also as diplomatic pressure on host countries to improve foreign labor protection systems. Domestically, the moratorium

was also framed as a demonstration of the government's commitment to safeguard the safety, dignity, and welfare of its citizens abroad.

The policy reflects strong political, diplomatic, and domestic dimensions. From a diplomatic perspective, the moratorium functioned as a means of urging Saudi Arabia to reform labor protection mechanisms. Domestically, the decision was closely tied to public outrage over cases of abuse, violence, and executions of Indonesian workers, especially women in the domestic sector. President Joko Widodo even argued that domestic work abroad undermines national dignity while placing women in particularly vulnerable positions (Platt, 2018; Yi, 2017). In this regard, the moratorium represents a state-driven protectionist policy toward vulnerable groups, while simultaneously reflecting the state's complicity in creating such vulnerabilities in the first place (Elias, 2013).

Nevertheless, the moratorium was not without controversy. Supporters considered it a bold move and tangible evidence of the state's presence in protecting its citizens from exploitation and human rights violations. Critics, however, argued that the policy had severe economic repercussions, particularly for families in migrant-sending regions who depend on remittances. At the macro level, national remittances from the Middle East declined, exerting additional pressure on Indonesia's economy (Platt, 2018).

In sum, the 2015 moratorium can be interpreted as a bold policy that signified a paradigm shift in Indonesia's labor migration governance. Migrant workers were no longer viewed solely as contributors of foreign exchange but as citizens whose rights must be guaranteed by the state. Although the moratorium entailed significant economic consequences, it symbolized the government's prioritization of the safety and dignity of its citizens abroad.

3.3 The Moratorium Period and the Discourse on Its Revocation (2015-2025)

As reported extensively in mass media and publications from the Ministry of Manpower, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, the enforcement of a moratorium on the placement of Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) in Saudi Arabia in 2015 marked a new phase in bilateral labor relations, characterized by intense negotiations. The moratorium was introduced in response to the execution of two Indonesian female domestic workers, which was carried out without official notification to the Indonesian government. This incident provoked widespread public outrage, as it was seen not only as a violation of diplomatic norms but also as evidence of inadequate protection for Indonesian nationals employed in the domestic sector. According to Woro Srihastuti Sulistyaningrum, Deputy for Family Quality and Population Development at the Coordinating Ministry for Human Development and Culture, the moratorium was a continuation of earlier partial restrictions introduced in 2011, following the execution of Ruyati binti Sapubi, and eventually expanded into a total ban in 2015.

However, the policy intended to provide protection gave rise to unintended consequences. Thousands of prospective workers resorted to irregular channels, misusing pilgrimage, umrah, or visitor visas to gain entry for employment purposes. This irregular migration pattern heightened vulnerability to exploitation and human

trafficking (TPPO). Consequently, the number of deportations and labor disputes increased significantly, suggesting that the moratorium shifted migration practices rather than halting labor flows altogether.

During this period, Saudi Arabia began introducing labor governance reforms. The government launched the *syarikah* system based on licensed recruitment agencies, introduced the digital portal *MUSANED* to facilitate recruitment and employment contracts, and initiated the One Channel Placement System (*Sistem Penempatan Satu Kanal* or SPSK) designed to curb illegal recruitment. These reforms were both a response to international criticism and an acknowledgment of the domestic demand for foreign workers, particularly in the household sector.

In October 2018, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia signed the SPSK agreement as a compromise to break the deadlock created by the moratorium. The agreement was consistent with the mandate of Law No. 18/2017 on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, which obliges the state to ensure protection at every stage of placement. The new system was expected to integrate labor market information between the two countries, enhance transparency, and strengthen protection mechanisms. Nevertheless, its initial implementation fell short of expectations. Reports of violations actually increased in 2019, raising doubts about the seriousness of the reform.

The then-Minister of Manpower, Ida Fauziyah, reiterated the government's commitment to improving regulatory frameworks. In her meeting with the Saudi Ambassador in 2020, she stated that "the government continues to work hard to improve placement and protection regulations as a demonstration of its commitment to safeguarding Indonesian citizens employed as migrant workers in Saudi Arabia." This statement reflected Indonesia's cautious approach, prioritizing protection over placement alone.

The trial phase of SPSK between 2020 and 2022 was limited to six categories of domestic work in selected regions, accompanied by the establishment of a Joint Task Force for evaluation. Concurrently, Saudi Arabia introduced the Skills Verification Program to assess the competencies of foreign workers. Minister Ida Fauziyah welcomed this initiative with optimism, emphasizing that the program "can enhance the quality of Indonesian workers through the competency standards established by the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia."

Despite ongoing reforms, Indonesia maintained the moratorium. Yet, by 2023, discourse on its revocation gained traction. Several factors fueled this momentum: the improvement of bilateral diplomatic relations, economic incentives through remittances, and the issuance of Presidential Regulation No. 130/2024 on Strengthening the Governance of Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers. Saudi Arabia also signaled openness, with its Ambassador in Jakarta, Esam A. Abid Althagafi, asserting that Indonesian workers "remain irreplaceable, given cultural compatibility and shared religious identity as fellow Muslims."

The situation culminated in March 2025, when President Prabowo Subianto approved the revocation of the moratorium. The Minister for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (P2MI), Abdul Kadir Karding, declared that "the existing protection in Saudi Arabia has now become highly adequate," adding that the Saudi

government was “willing to guarantee the welfare and health of Indonesian migrant workers.” He further stressed that the moratorium’s revocation was expected to curb irregular migration and simultaneously increase remittance contributions to the national economy.

An inter-ministerial coordination meeting led by the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs subsequently produced eight strategic agreements. These included strengthening the protection of women and children, prohibiting visa conversion practices, and integrating Indonesia’s SiskoPMI digital system with Saudi Arabia’s MUSANED. The agreements underscored the government’s commitment to designating Saudi Arabia as a pilot project for reopening placements in the Middle East. Although the initial plan envisioned the first phase of placement to begin in June 2025, by August implementation remained uncertain. Resistance from civil society groups, who argued that protection had not been fully guaranteed, highlighted the persistent tension between protection imperatives and economic interests. Thus, the period from 2015 to 2025 reflects a complex transition: while the moratorium symbolized state protection on the one hand, economic needs and diplomatic pressures on the other hand propelled its revocation as a form of compromise. The key challenge ahead lies in ensuring that the moratorium’s revocation is accompanied by consistent protection mechanisms, enabling Indonesian migrant workers to work in Saudi Arabia safely, securely, and with dignity.

Critical Analysis: Protection and Strategic Interests

The employment relations between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia cannot be understood merely through numerical indicators such as placement figures or the volume of remittances. Rather, they encompass a broader tension between economic interests and human protection. Analytically, it is evident that despite the protests triggered by Indonesia’s moratorium on the deployment of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in the domestic sector, bilateral relations between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia have remained intact. This is largely due to domestic policy improvements in Indonesia as well as adjustments made within bilateral agreements on PMI placement in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the migrant worker issue in Saudi Arabia does not directly intersect with Indonesia’s vital foreign policy interests, such as maritime boundary delimitation or disputes over cultural heritage. This stands in contrast with the case of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia (Elias, 2013), which often has broader implications for bilateral diplomacy. Consequently, the PMI issue in Saudi Arabia has not generated significant diplomatic tension. From a domestic perspective, this dynamic demonstrates that Indonesia–Saudi Arabia diplomatic interactions have remained relatively stable, even under the moratorium policy.

Lasim (2022) emphasizes that Indonesia’s migrant worker protection policy in Saudi Arabia has not disrupted the long-standing bilateral relations between the two states. Issues concerning PMI have generally been resolved without escalating into diplomatic disputes, while Indonesia and Saudi Arabia continue to share strategic interests in regional stability, economic cooperation, the administration of Hajj and Umrah, and

support for Palestine. As such, the bilateral relationship remains rational and proportional despite its inherent dynamics.

Neoliberal institutionalism assumes that inter-state cooperation can be achieved through institutions, rules, and agreements, even in the presence of diverging interests. Within the context of labor migration, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia—as well as mechanisms such as the One Channel System and MUSANED—may be understood as instruments that bring order to an otherwise uncertain relationship. For Indonesia, the MoU serves as a diplomatic tool that provides legal certainty for PMI, whereas for Saudi Arabia, it ensures the continued supply of much-needed domestic labor. Theoretically, such institutions function to reduce uncertainty, provide dispute-resolution mechanisms, and establish shared standards to which both parties can adhere.

Nonetheless, the effectiveness of these institutions is never entirely neutral. Saudi Arabia, as the receiving state, maintains a stronger bargaining position, particularly since the high global demand for domestic workers compels sending countries to compete. This power asymmetry renders the MoU and digital platforms useful in addressing some issues, but incapable of dismantling the root of structural vulnerability—namely, the kafalah system, which continues to subordinate workers to their employers. Thus, bilateral cooperation contributes to incremental improvements but does not constitute a comprehensive solution.

From the perspective of human security, the focus of protection shifts from the state to the individual. Migrant workers should therefore be regarded as rights-bearing subjects of protection, rather than as mere economic objects defined by the scale of their remittances. The deployment of Indonesian workers to Saudi Arabia has consistently been accompanied by challenges, as the majority are employed in the domestic sector. This sector operates within the private sphere of households, where state oversight is inherently limited. Despite the signing of new MoUs and the adoption of digital systems such as MUSANED, the risks of exploitation remain high. Cases of abuse, harassment, and even criminalization of PMI are likely to recur, given the persistence of unchanged structural conditions.

Accordingly, the success of migration diplomacy should not be measured solely by the magnitude of remittances but by the extent to which workers' dignity, safety, and rights are genuinely safeguarded.

This reveals the diplomatic dilemma confronting Indonesia. On one hand, economic imperatives encourage the government to consider lifting the moratorium. Remittances from Saudi Arabia have previously contributed substantially to national foreign exchange reserves and supported the household economies of migrant communities. Reopening placement channels is thus viewed as a potential remedy for high unemployment in migrant-sending regions. On the other hand, the government also bears the burden of its protection commitments. Lifting the moratorium without adequate safeguards would expose PMI to renewed risks of exploitation. Should such cases resurface and gain widespread public attention, the government would face serious political repercussions, including accusations of failing to protect its citizens, erosion of legitimacy in the eyes of civil society, and damage to the state's diplomatic image—particularly given its emphasis on citizen protection.

In this context, Indonesia–Saudi Arabia labor relations place the government in a precarious position. Any decision to revoke the moratorium must be carefully weighed, as short-term economic gains are inseparable from long-term challenges concerning the protection of PMI and the political credibility of the state.

4 Result

The findings of this study on the discourse surrounding the lifting of the moratorium on the deployment of Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) to Saudi Arabia reveal a complex interplay of economic, political, and structural factors.

First, the primary driver behind the proposed lifting of the moratorium lies in economic interests. For Indonesia, remittances from Saudi Arabia hold strategic significance, both as a source of national foreign exchange and as a vital pillar of household economies in migrant-sending regions. Since the moratorium was imposed in 2015, remittances from Saudi Arabia have declined significantly, leading to a reduction in household income for families that rely heavily on earnings from abroad. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia continues to face a growing demand for domestic workers, particularly women, driven by changing family structures, urbanization, and the persistent shortage of local labor in the domestic sector. Consequently, the economic interests of both countries converge, thereby fueling the discourse on lifting the moratorium.

Second, political and diplomatic considerations also play a crucial role. The lifting of the moratorium is perceived as part of efforts to normalize Indonesia–Saudi Arabia relations, which had been strained by cases of violence against Indonesian migrant workers in the previous decade. Through bilateral cooperation mechanisms, both governments seek to demonstrate a renewed commitment to managing labor migration. Within this framework, bilateral agreements—such as Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and other accords on recruitment mechanisms and worker protection—serve as critical instruments for promoting more transparent migration governance. However, the effectiveness of such agreements ultimately depends on concrete implementation on the ground, including the Indonesian government’s capacity to supervise recruitment processes and enforce sanctions against violations, as well as the Saudi government’s commitment to upholding protection standards.

Third, the core challenge remains the structural vulnerabilities embedded in the domestic work sector. The persistence of the *kafala* system places migrant workers in a subordinate position under their employers, restricting their mobility and often impeding access to legal protection. These vulnerabilities are compounded by the fact that the majority of Indonesian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia are women, who face the risk of double exploitation: as workers and as women within a patriarchal social structure. Risks of violence, harassment, and even criminalization remain pervasive, suggesting that lifting the moratorium without fundamental reforms may merely reproduce the longstanding cycle of problems.

Fourth, the post-moratorium policy also reflects Indonesia’s broader diplomatic orientation toward establishing a strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia. For the

Indonesian government, reopening labor migration channels is not only a matter of employment but also part of a broader agenda to strengthen economic, political, and religious cooperation with a state that holds a central position in the Middle East. Nonetheless, the legitimacy of this diplomatic approach remains fragile if it is not accompanied by a genuine commitment to the protection of Indonesian migrant workers. Should cases of abuse or violations of workers' rights reemerge after the moratorium is lifted, Indonesia's diplomatic credibility would be called into question, both domestically and internationally.

In sum, this analysis demonstrates that while lifting the moratorium may create new opportunities for revitalizing bilateral cooperation and restoring economic benefits, the long-term success of this policy ultimately depends on the extent to which both countries are able to uphold the principles of protection, justice, and equality in the governance of labor migration.

5 Conclusion

The efforts to lift the moratorium on Indonesian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia remain relevant both as an instrument of protective diplomacy and as a means of strengthening strategic partnership; however, such relevance is conditional. The primary drivers of this policy are the economic need for remittances and the political interest in normalizing bilateral relations. Bilateral agreements and cooperation instruments such as the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), the One Channel System, and MUSANED may serve as important foundations, yet their effectiveness is highly contingent upon concrete implementation and rigorous monitoring. Structural vulnerabilities—particularly the kafala system and the subordinated position of female domestic workers—persist as major challenges. Consequently, the legitimacy of Indonesia's diplomatic stance can only be sustained if the lifting of the moratorium is accompanied by a serious commitment to safeguarding the rights of migrant workers.

Disclosure of Interests. The authors declare no competing interests.

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