

Indonesia



Antje Missbach, *Troubled Transit: Asylum Seekers Stuck in Indonesia*

Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015. 289 pages. Soft cover, \$29.90. ISBN: 978-981-4620-56-7.

THE PHENOMENON OF transit migration is a growing concern for scholarship and policymakers in the second decade of the twenty-first century, not least due to the recent movement and trafficking of Syrian refugees to Europe. The archipelagic nation of Indonesia, however, a “transit country” for asylum seekers, is largely under-studied. As Missbach writes, even the term “transit migration” has Eurocentric application (15). As

to be expected, the interest in asylum seekers from Indonesia lies mainly in the “destination” country; in this case Australia. Crucially, Missbach’s book “is not intended as yet another critical analysis of Australian asylum and immigration policies” (9), which is a topic regularly canvassed in Australian popular media, pundits, former and current politicians and scholars alike, most of whom have never been to Indonesia. As Missbach writes, existing contributions on asylum seekers in the Indo-Pacific region remain “Australia-centric in their understanding of the matter” and as such her book “hopes to divert the hitherto Australia-centric gaze northwards” (9).

Missbach is not a scholar on Australian or worldwide migration policy, but rather an “Indonesianist” anthropologist. Her book provides an important contribution to our understanding of the issues of asylum seekers in transit countries, who are unable to gain citizenship while “waiting” to travel to their intended “final” destination. For many, to “illegally” (as the Australian government would have it) travel by boat from Indonesia to Australia is a necessary option because while treading water in Indonesia, asylum seekers feel they are drowning in a sea of boredom, despondency, and ill-health, all the while yearning to find a solution to help their families back home. Others even choose to return home, but the UNHCR would not approve their plan, leaving them stuck in Indonesia. Missbach avoids “over-emphasis on the agency that transit migrants have over their own destinies” and in any case “transit migrants rarely follow set plans” (242–43). Rather than try to deeply understand and conceptualize asylum seeker choices (or lack thereof), the Australian government has chosen largely to typecast these people at worst as “queue jumpers,” at best “victims” of the scourge of “people smuggling” operations. Missbach’s book adds significant detail and description of the lives of these asylum seekers; what motivates them to remain, return, or move from Indonesia, decisions which are occasionally well-thought out, while at other times seemingly spur of the moment life-and-death choices.

Methodologically, this is no easy task. Missbach conducted 180 formal and informal interviews in numerous provinces of Indonesia, including many far-flung regions of the archipelago. She visited immigration detention centres; prisons; shelters; and makeshift centers such as schools and hotels (21). She conducted many interviews in Indonesian, no doubt crucial to research material, but even then not all asylum seekers were fluent in English and Indonesian, so generally younger people with more Indonesian language communication skills were over-represented. To make matters more difficult, this research was conducted at a time when the Australian government was caught spying on Indonesian government officials, meaning many in Indonesia viewed her as a “foreign spy” (22). Laughing off accusations of being a spy is one thing, but dealing emotionally with the life-and-death situation of asylum seekers in Indonesia would be far more difficult. In one story (63), Missbach explains how one of her research subjects, Tariq, called while on a boat to Australia. “Judging from Tariq’s screaming and that of others in the background, I could only assume that the boat was in distress,” Missbach writes, “In the few seconds of that final call, Tariq had given me no information about his location. Several days after this call, an empty boat was washed ashore ... I have not heard from Tariq since that last phone call” (64).

While Tariq and other asylum seekers have compelling and detailed accounts told, the book should not be seen as a colourful and graphic collection of their lives. It is a scholarly work of significance and is thoroughly researched. For example, in a chapter on the Australia-Indonesia relationship one is struck by the amount of funds spent on “border security”—AU\$7.9 million in 2008 to develop Indonesia’s “border movement alert system”; AU\$86.8 million in 2014 (over three years) as part of a “regional cooperation agreement to manage asylum seekers living in the archipelago” (195), and many more.

While this might be seen as an Australia-centric problem, politicians claiming to be “tough” on asylum seekers in transit countries is an issue not only relevant to Australia. In the wake of photos of dead Syrian children being washed up on shores, newly deposed Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott urged leaders in Europe to adopt his tough border protection policies, including turning back boats, because it saved lives. While the politically sensitive issue of asylum seekers coming to Australia by boat existed long before Abbott’s reign, Missbach describes his “regime” as going “from bad to worse” when it came to asylum seeker policies (191).

This book would be a crucial resource for scholars, government officials, and global humanitarian organizations devoted to migration. In addition, anyone interested in the Australia-Indonesia relationship should be urged to read it. Given the polarization and often uninformed commentary on asylum seekers travelling from Indonesia to Australia, Missbach’s book provides a thorough, precise, and deeply researched scholarly analysis. But the most engaging aspects of the book remain the voices of those previously underrepresented in scholarly and media accounts of transit migrants. Their stories give a sense of the effect transit migration will have on their lives even beyond the years they were “stuck” in Indonesia. As one Iraqi asylum seeker quoted in the book says (240): “Every country has its own method of torture. In Iraq they use bullets, in Indonesia it is the discrimination by organizations and their regulations. Night and day they say we are criminals, illegals, this was more painful than a bullet to your head.”

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