



The Rise of Citizen Protection in Indonesian Foreign Policy in the Reform Era

Ann Marie Murphy



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- *In post-Reformasi Indonesia, public pressure as well as the need to win elections has incentivised politicians to support the rights of Indonesian migrants.*
- *Indonesian responses to the Cambodian and Middle Eastern crises illustrate the political salience of citizen protection and the challenges the government faces in delivering on this commitment.*

COMMENTARY

Citizen protection has become a core Indonesian foreign policy interest in its democratic era. In January 2026, Foreign Minister Sugiono called citizen protection “[a primary pillar of our diplomacy](#)” while former Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi ranked citizen protection [one of the top three foreign policy priorities](#). This commitment to protecting its people abroad marks a dramatic policy shift from the Soeharto era and has earned Indonesia recognition [as one of the countries that does most to safeguard its nationals](#) abroad.

In 2026, Indonesia's commitment to citizen protection has been tested by the Cambodian government's crackdown on scam centres that left thousands of Indonesians stranded and the widening conflict in the Middle East following the US-Israeli war against Iran that threatens over half a million Indonesians. Indonesian responses to both crises illustrate the political salience of citizen protection as well as the challenges the government faces in delivering on this commitment.

From Economic Exploitation to Protection

Most Indonesians living overseas are migrant workers. The Indonesian economy has never been able to generate enough jobs to employ its working-age population. Migration is viewed as a mechanism to reduce unemployment and alleviate poverty through remittances.

In the 1980s, the Soeharto regime created a formal labour migration system to send Indonesian workers to the Gulf. Consistent with Soeharto's development ethos, it labelled [Indonesian workers "migrant exports"](#). In 2024, [5 million Indonesians worked overseas legally](#) while another [5.4 million worked overseas illegally](#); together, they [remitted US\\$16 billion](#), slightly more than 1.1% of Indonesia's GDP.

Most Indonesian migrants are poorly educated and unskilled, working in dirty, dangerous and demeaning jobs. They are vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers who fail to pay wages or otherwise abide by labour contracts. Women employed as domestic workers are sometimes subjected to physical and sexual abuse. During Soeharto's authoritarian regime, [migrants were often exploited](#) by labour agencies and corrupt Indonesian officials who demanded bribes for processing visas, passports and other government documents. The Soeharto regime prioritised its economic interest in migrant remittances, while ignoring the difficulties that migrants suffered.

In the Reform era, the free press publicised the problems facing migrants, and NGOs generated strong public support for their cause. The need to win elections gave politicians an incentive to support migrant rights. The publicity surrounding the May 2004 torture case of Nirmala Bonet, a 19-year-old woman employed as a domestic worker in Malaysia, made [migrant worker protection an issue in the July 2004 presidential election](#). In 2004, public outrage over migrant worker tragedies and President Megawati's interest in re-election helped get Indonesia's first migrant worker law passed and a Memorandum of Understanding on Migrant Workers with Malaysia negotiated.

Policies Adopted at Home and Abroad to Enhance Citizen Protection

Indonesia has since taken numerous steps to better protect its citizens overseas. It passed laws to curb the power of private labour recruitment companies whose profit-maximising interests often forced migrants to borrow money at usurious rates, leading to debt bondage. It revamped government institutions and invested in systems to track and communicate with citizens abroad. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Kemlu) introduced electronic passports and digitised the payment system for the issuance and renewal of passports and other services so that payments are cashless, reducing the opportunity for corruption. In [a 2024 study](#) of 12 states with large overseas populations, Indonesia ranked as one of the countries most dedicated to protecting its citizens, despite having significantly less funding and government capacity than other states.

The Moral Hazard of Protecting Citizens Abroad

A perverse consequence of Indonesia's commitment to protecting its nationals abroad is that Indonesians often expect the government to bail them out when they break the law, despite government warnings to the contrary. This happened in January 2026, when the Cambodian government crackdowns on scam centres sent over [5400 Indonesians](#) to the embassy in Phnom Penh. Many claimed to be victims of human trafficking and requested repatriation by the government. Preliminary investigations, however, found that [none of the 3,917](#) former scam centre workers assessed were victims of human trafficking and many admitted to voluntary involvement in illegal activities. The scam worker case illustrates the moral hazard: if citizens face no consequences for risky or illegal behaviour, then repatriating them without penalties only incentivises more risky behaviour.

Indonesia navigated its commitment to helping its citizens abroad alongside its interest in deterring illegal behaviour through a combination of protection and prosecution. To accommodate citizens who lacked housing, Kemlu worked with NGOs and Cambodian authorities to open shelters which housed [at least 1,200 Indonesians](#). Most former scam workers faced fines for immigration violations and could not leave the country until those fines were paid, so Kemlu negotiated a reduction of the fines with the Cambodian government. Since many no longer had passports, the embassy issued [1,427 travel documents](#) to facilitate their return and [leased planes to repatriate nearly 3,000](#) citizens.



Indonesia balances its commitment to helping its citizens abroad with its efforts to deter illegal behaviour through a combination of protection and prosecution.

Image source: Unsplash.

At the same time, Indonesia is committed to prosecuting those accused of human trafficking, recruitment, illegal gambling and fraud. All returnees will be sent to a government housing centre where they will undergo additional [investigation by the Indonesian police](#) to determine if they were perpetrators of illegal activities. Returnees found to be victims will be sent back to their hometowns, but those suspected of being [perpetrators will be prosecuted in accordance with the law](#).

Citizen Protection in Conflict Zones

The 28 February US-Israeli war against Iran that has spread throughout the Middle East threatens [519,042 Indonesian residents](#) in the region, apart from thousands of Indonesian travellers. As Iran retaliated with strikes against Gulf states and Israel expanded military operations against Lebanon and Syria, Indonesian missions

scrambled to assess the risk to their citizens, provide advice and devise contingency plans in case evacuation became necessary. Foreign Minister Sugiono stated that, amid the deteriorating security situation, [the government's priority was citizen safety](#).

On 3 March, Kemlu offered to evacuate the [329 Indonesians](#) in Iran. Getting people out of Iran during the US and Israeli bombardment and the closure of most regional airspace is a complicated endeavour. The first batch of [32 Indonesians repatriated from Iran](#) travelled by road from Tehran to the border with Azerbaijan, from where they travelled to Turkey for flights back to Jakarta. As of 11 March, over [50,000 Indonesian pilgrims](#) were in Saudi Arabia, and over 14,000 were stranded due to flight cancellations. With Saudi airspace still open, Indonesian officials scrambled to devise alternative travel arrangements, working with Garuda Indonesia and Lion Air, among other airlines. Government officials also helped provide food and necessities to stranded citizens.

To date, only a small number of Indonesians have been directly in harm's way, and no Indonesian deaths have been reported. Most Indonesians are in Saudi Arabia, where authorities have advised residents to remain calm and in place, a message Jakarta has communicated to citizens. Unless the conflict spreads to Saudi Arabia, Indonesia should be able to continue to protect its citizens through the diplomatic and logistical means it has used to date.

Conclusion

The rise of citizen protection as a prominent Indonesian interest is an extremely welcome development for a country with millions of citizens working overseas. The Cambodian scam centre and Middle East conflict cases illustrate the challenges Indonesia faces in protecting its nationals abroad.

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