Feeling Homey: Abuse of Residence Permits in Southeast Asia, Privilege and Precarity

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SEIKAT Jurnal Ilmu Sosial, Politik dan Hukum

e-ISSN: 2964-0962

SEIKAT: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial, Politik dan Hukum

https://ejournal.45mataram.ac.id/index.php/seikat

Vol. 5, No. 4, Agustus 2026

Page: 1600 - 1618

Available at:

https://ejournal.45mataram.ac.id/index.php/seikat/article/view/3334

DOI:

https://doi.org/10.55681/seikat.v5i4.3334

Article History:

Received: 10-07-2026
Revised: 03-08-2026
Accepted: 04-08-2026

***Keywords** : The abuse of residence permits by foreign nationals has become an increasing concern in Southeast Asia due to its connection with immigration violations, transnational crime, and challenges in migration governance. This issue is not limited to administrative violations such as overstaying but also involves the misuse of tourist and business visas, document forgery, and exploitation of legal loopholes for economic or criminal purposes. This study aims to examine the forms, underlying factors, and regulatory challenges related to residence permit abuse in Southeast Asia, with particular attention to Indonesia. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach through library research by analyzing secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and relevant reports. The findings indicate that residence permit abuse is influenced by various factors, including global mobility, economic inequality, digital migration trends, weak regulatory adaptation, and limited coordination among law enforcement institutions. The study also highlights the influence of social privilege and migrant vulnerability in shaping different experiences of immigration enforcement. Strengthening integrated monitoring systems, improving inter-agency cooperation, and developing adaptive immigration policies are essential to establish a more effective, fair, and sustainable immigration governance framework in Southeast Asia.*

***Keywords** : Residence Permit Abuse; Immigration Governance; Foreign Nationals; Southeast Asia; Migration Control*

Abstrak : The abuse of residence permits by foreign nationals has become an increasing concern in Southeast Asia due to its connection with immigration violations, transnational crime, and challenges in migration governance. This issue is not limited to administrative violations such as overstaying but also involves the misuse of tourist and business visas, document forgery, and exploitation of legal loopholes for economic or criminal purposes. This study aims to examine the forms, underlying factors, and regulatory challenges related to residence permit abuse in Southeast Asia, with particular attention to Indonesia. This research employs a descriptive qualitative approach through library research by analyzing secondary sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and relevant reports. The findings indicate that residence permit abuse is influenced by various factors, including global mobility, economic inequality, digital migration trends, weak regulatory adaptation, and limited coordination among law enforcement institutions. The study also highlights the influence of social privilege and migrant vulnerability in shaping different experiences of immigration enforcement. Strengthening integrated monitoring systems, improving inter-agency cooperation, and developing adaptive immigration policies are essential to establish a more effective, fair, and sustainable immigration governance framework in Southeast Asia.

Kata Kunci: Residence Permit Abuse; Immigration Governance; Foreign Nationals; Southeast Asia; Migration Control

INTRODUCTION

The increasing intensity of global mobility has fundamentally transformed the governance of international migration. Advances in transportation, digital technology, and cross-border economic integration have enabled individuals to move more easily across national boundaries for tourism, employment, education, investment, and long-term residence. Within this context, Southeast Asia has emerged as one of the world's most attractive migration destinations due to its strategic geographical position, relatively affordable cost of living, cultural diversity, and expanding digital economy. Countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia have experienced a substantial increase in the number of foreign nationals seeking temporary or permanent residence. While this trend contributes positively to tourism, foreign investment, and cultural exchange, it simultaneously presents complex legal challenges related to immigration governance and the enforcement of residence permit regulations.

The growing preference among foreigners to establish long-term lives in Southeast Asia has generated what may be described as the phenomenon of *feeling homey*, referring to a condition in which foreign nationals perceive host countries as comfortable places to reside beyond the purposes authorized under their immigration status. Although such circumstances do not inherently constitute legal violations, they frequently create opportunities for the abuse of residence permits. Residence permits issued for tourism, social visits, retirement, education, or investment may be misused to conduct unauthorized employment, establish informal businesses, or facilitate other activities inconsistent with immigration regulations. These practices undermine the integrity of national immigration systems and raise broader concerns regarding legal certainty, state sovereignty, and the effectiveness of migration governance.

Residence permit abuse has become increasingly complex because it no longer consists solely of administrative violations such as overstaying or failure to renew immigration documents. Instead, immigration violations are often interconnected with transnational criminal activities, including document forgery, human trafficking, narcotics distribution, cyber fraud, illegal labor recruitment, and online financial crimes. Criminal networks frequently exploit legal loopholes within immigration systems by utilizing legitimate visa categories to disguise unlawful activities. Consequently, immigration law can no longer be viewed merely as an administrative instrument regulating the movement of people, but also as an essential component of national security, crime prevention, and international legal cooperation. The intersection between immigration law and transnational organized crime therefore requires a comprehensive legal approach that balances border control with the protection of legitimate cross-border mobility.

The complexity of residence permit abuse is further shaped by the unequal socio-economic positions of foreign nationals themselves. Not all immigration violations originate from identical motivations or circumstances. Some individuals from economically developed countries intentionally exploit tourist or digital nomad visa schemes to avoid labor regulations, taxation, or business licensing requirements while enjoying relatively low living costs in Southeast Asian countries. Their economic privilege enables them to navigate immigration systems with greater flexibility and access to legal resources. Conversely, other migrants originating from politically unstable or economically disadvantaged countries may violate immigration regulations due to circumstances beyond their control, including armed conflict, political persecution, environmental disasters, or severe economic hardship. Their immigration status often reflects conditions of vulnerability rather than deliberate legal manipulation. This contrast illustrates the coexistence of privilege and precarity within contemporary migration governance, demonstrating that identical immigration violations may arise from fundamentally different legal and social realities.

Such disparities challenge conventional approaches to immigration law enforcement that emphasize formal compliance without adequately considering the broader structural factors influencing migrants' behavior. Residence permits, originally designed as administrative instruments regulating lawful entry and stay, increasingly function as mechanisms through which unequal access to mobility, employment opportunities, and legal protection is reproduced. Consequently, the abuse of residence permits cannot be understood solely as individual misconduct but must also be examined within the broader framework of migration governance, regulatory design, and state capacity to supervise increasingly diverse forms of cross-border mobility. This perspective becomes particularly relevant in Southeast Asia, where differences in immigration policies, visa regimes, labor market regulations, and institutional capacities create opportunities for regulatory arbitrage by both individuals and organized criminal networks.

Previous studies concerning immigration law have predominantly focused on border security, immigration control, visa policy, or the protection of migrant workers. Other scholars have examined irregular migration and transnational crime separately without comprehensively addressing the relationship between residence permit abuse, legal privilege, and migrant precarity within Southeast Asia's regional migration governance. As a result, limited attention has been given to understanding how different socio-economic backgrounds influence patterns of immigration violations and how regulatory inconsistencies across Southeast Asian jurisdictions contribute to such abuses. This gap indicates the need for a more integrated legal analysis that combines immigration law, migration governance, and socio-legal perspectives in examining the misuse of residence permits.

This research therefore seeks to fill this gap by analyzing the forms and patterns of residence permit abuse in Southeast Asia through the analytical framework of privilege and precarity. Rather than treating immigration violations merely as isolated legal infractions, this study examines how legal loopholes, disparities in immigration regulation, and unequal access to mobility shape the behavior of different categories of foreign nationals. Furthermore, the research explores the extent to which weaknesses in immigration governance facilitate the exploitation of residence permit systems for both economic gain and transnational criminal activities.

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary legal approach that integrates immigration law, migration governance, and socio-legal analysis to explain the coexistence of privilege and vulnerability within residence permit abuse. By positioning immigration violations within broader regional governance dynamics, this research contributes to the development of legal scholarship concerning migration regulation in Southeast Asia while providing policy recommendations for strengthening residence permit governance without undermining the protection of migrants' fundamental rights. Ultimately, this study aims to identify the prevailing forms of residence permit abuse, examine the interaction between privilege and precarity in shaping immigration violations, analyze the regulatory loopholes that enable such practices, and formulate recommendations for a more effective, equitable, and legally accountable immigration system throughout Southeast Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Definition of Immigration and Types of Residence Permits

According to Law Number 6 of 2011 concerning Immigration, particularly Article 1 paragraph (17), a residence permit is defined as a permit granted by an immigration officer or another authorized official that allows a foreign national to stay and/or reside within the territory of Indonesia (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 6 Tahun 2011 Tentang Kemigrasian, 2011). The permit is issued in accordance with the applicable laws and regulations governing the requirements and procedures for foreign nationals residing in Indonesia. Accordingly, holders of valid residence permits are permitted to carry out activities that correspond to the type of permit granted, provided that such activities do not violate Indonesian laws and regulations.

Based on Law Number 6 of 2011 concerning Immigration and Government Regulation Number 31 of 2013, residence permits for foreign nationals in Indonesia are classified into three categories according to their purposes, duration, and conditions (Peraturan Pemerintah Republik Indonesia Nomor 31 Tahun 2013 Tentang Peraturan Pelaksanaan Undang-Undang Nomor 6 Tahun 2011 Tentang Keimigrasian, 2013; Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 6 Tahun 2011 Tentang Kemigrasian, 2011). These include the Visit Stay Permit (*Izin Tinggal Kunjungan* or ITK), the Limited Stay Permit (*Izin Tinggal Terbatas* or ITAS), and the Permanent Stay Permit (*Izin Tinggal Tetap* or ITAP).

The Visit Stay Permit (ITK) is granted to foreign nationals entering Indonesia for purposes such as tourism, family visits, socio-cultural activities, business, governmental affairs, or emergency situations (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 6 Tahun 2011 Tentang Kemigrasian, 2011). This permit is temporary and generally valid for 30 to 180 days, depending on the purpose of the visit and the applicable immigration policy. Holders of an ITK are not permitted to work or undertake activities that are inconsistent with the purpose of the permit, while the duration of stay is determined according to the type of visit and the planned activities of the foreign national.

The Limited Stay Permit (ITAS) is granted to foreign nationals who intend to stay in Indonesia for a longer period, generally ranging from six months to two years, and may be extended (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 6 Tahun 2011 Tentang Kemigrasian, 2011). This permit is intended for foreign nationals working in Indonesia, undertaking professional assignments, joining family members, conducting research, or making investments. Applicants are required to fulfill the prescribed administrative requirements, including sponsorship by a local individual or institution, and must comply with the applicable immigration and employment regulations throughout their stay.

The Permanent Stay Permit (ITAP) is issued to foreign nationals who have legally resided in Indonesia for an extended period and satisfy the requirements for long-term residence (Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia Nomor 6 Tahun 2011 Tentang Kemigrasian, 2011). In general, an ITAP may be granted after a foreign national has continuously held an ITAS for three to five years. Applicants are also required to demonstrate stable income, good conduct, and the absence of a criminal record. The permit is valid for five years and may be renewed, allowing its holders broader opportunities for employment and investment in Indonesia in accordance with the applicable legal provisions.

B. Functions and Roles of Residence Permits in Indonesia's Immigration System

Residence permits serve important functions within Indonesia's immigration system. Beyond authorizing the stay of foreign nationals, residence permits also contribute to maintaining national security and public order by regulating the rights, obligations, and activities of foreigners during their residence in Indonesia.

One of the main functions of a residence permit is to provide legal authorization for foreign nationals. A valid residence permit grants legal status to foreigners residing in Indonesia and allows them to stay and conduct activities in accordance with the conditions specified in their permits. In addition, the residence permit provides legal protection for foreign nationals during their stay, as long as they comply with the applicable laws and regulations.

Residence permits also function as monitoring instruments for immigration authorities. Through the issuance and registration of residence permits, immigration officers can monitor the movement and activities of foreign nationals in Indonesia. This monitoring mechanism allows authorities to assess whether foreign nationals comply with immigration regulations and ensure that they do not engage in unlawful activities.

Furthermore, residence permits serve as a regulatory framework for immigration enforcement. In cases where violations occur, such as overstaying, misuse of residence permits, or engaging in activities that are not permitted under the granted status, the residence permit becomes the legal basis for imposing administrative or legal measures in accordance with applicable regulations.

Another function of residence permits is to determine the limitations of activities, as well as the rights and obligations of foreign nationals during their stay in Indonesia. The rights granted to foreign nationals may vary depending on the type of residence permit they possess, including access to certain public services. At the same time, foreign nationals are required to comply with Indonesian laws and regulations, including obligations to report changes in status and renew their residence permits according to the applicable procedures.

C. Theories Related to the Abuse of Residence Permits and Immigration Oversight

Several theories underpin the phenomenon of residence permit abuse and the framework of immigration oversight. These theories provide perspectives related to social conditions, individual behavior, legal weaknesses, and law enforcement approaches in addressing residence permit violations.

Social Privilege Theory (McIntosh, 1990) describes privilege as an invisible advantage held by dominant groups in society. In the context of residence permits, expatriates from developed countries often receive greater tolerance for administrative violations due to social perceptions, economic status, and the political standing of their countries of origin.

Precarity Theory (Butler, 2004) explains the conditions of individuals or groups living in uncertainty and social vulnerability. In the context of migration, undocumented migrants from developing countries often experience the constant threat of deportation, exploitation, and discriminatory treatment.

Transnational Migration Theory (Levitt & Schiller, 2004) highlights how migrants maintain social, economic, and political connections with their countries of origin while adapting to life in the host country. This theory explains the dynamics of foreign nationals who reside for extended periods while holding short-term visas.

Social Control Theory (Travis, 1969) argues that crime occurs when social bonds between individuals and society are weakened. In the context of foreign nationals, residence permit abuse may occur due to weak social and institutional controls. Such abuse reflects gaps in both community-based and institutional oversight. The police act as formal agents of social control responsible for ensuring compliance with norms and regulations, including immigration laws.

Crime Prevention Theory (Clarke, 1997) emphasizes the importance of preventive strategies, including surveillance, reducing opportunities for crime, and increasing perceived risks for offenders. In relation to residence permit abuse, preventive efforts may include increasing patrols, strengthening cooperation with immigration authorities, and enhancing monitoring in areas with high concentrations of foreign nationals. Joint operations and residence permit enforcement are forms of administrative crime prevention that may reduce broader criminal activities.

Organized Crime Theory (Smith, 1975) explains that organized crime is typically carried out by structured groups, including transnational networks. Abuse of residence permits may serve as a gateway to cross-border crimes such as human trafficking, drug smuggling, and cyber fraud.

Such abuse may become part of organized criminal activities, requiring intelligence capabilities and international cooperation, including cooperation with Interpol and police attachés, to identify and prosecute transnational criminal groups.

Legal System Dysfunction Theory (Quinney, 1970) suggests that inequality or weaknesses within the legal system create opportunities for individuals or groups to exploit legal loopholes. Residence permit abuse may result from poor inter-agency coordination, bureaucratic complexity, and limited oversight. Law enforcement institutions are responsible for addressing such dysfunction through firm and professional enforcement.

Rational Choice Theory (Cornish & Clarke, 1986) argues that individuals commit crimes after considering the risks and benefits of their actions. When the perceived risk of being caught is low, violations such as residence permit abuse become more likely. Weak enforcement may encourage foreign nationals to violate residence permit regulations for personal gain.

Broken Windows Theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982) states that ignoring minor violations may lead to more serious crimes. Residence permit abuse may appear as a minor violation; however, if it is not addressed, it may develop into more serious offenses. Therefore, early enforcement of residence regulations is necessary as a preventive measure against broader criminal activities.

Integrated Law Enforcement Theory, as discussed by Archbold (2012) and Ratcliffe (2025), has developed within security policy studies and emphasizes the importance of integrated responses among various law enforcement institutions at national and international levels. Preventing residence permit abuse cannot be handled by the police alone but requires cooperation with immigration authorities, intelligence agencies (BIN), the military (TNI), and international institutions. In this approach, the police play a central role as operational coordinators in inter-agency enforcement efforts.

D. Findings on Residence Permit Violations

Various studies indicate that the abuse of residence permits by foreign nationals in Indonesia is not merely an administrative issue but also involves complex legal, social, and political dimensions. Sutarwati (2016) highlights the increasing cases of overstaying and misuse of tourist visas by foreigners working illegally in Bali, which are often addressed through joint operations between police and immigration authorities. This finding is supported by Korassa Sonbai and Resen (2024), who revealed that several holders of Limited Stay Permits (ITAS) for investment purposes in Bali misused their visa status by engaging in illegal activities. These findings demonstrate that residence permit violations occur not only among lower-class migrants but also among individuals with significant economic resources. Therefore, visas, which are initially designed as administrative instruments, may become legal loopholes that can be exploited by certain parties.

Furthermore, residence permit abuse is frequently associated with transnational crimes. Setiawati (2015) identified a relationship between residence permit violations and the increasing number of human trafficking cases, while Surbakti et al. (2021) emphasized that some individuals who overstay are also involved in online fraud and fraudulent investment schemes. In this context, legal responses that rely solely on administrative deportation may be insufficient. International Amnesty (2010) noted that, compared with Malaysia, Indonesia tends to prioritize deportation rather than detention or prosecution, indicating limitations in handling cross-border investigations. The study further emphasizes that proper legal understanding of residence permit violations and firm law enforcement are necessary to establish a fair and effective immigration system and to prevent impunity, particularly for offenders with privileged or politically protected backgrounds.

In a broader context, Ford et al. (2012) argued that the residence permit system in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, is not entirely legally neutral because legal status may be influenced by factors such as race, social class, and nationality. This indicates that vulnerability to immigration enforcement is not solely determined by the violation itself but may also be influenced by the socio-political position of migrants. This perspective is consistent with Sutarwati (2016), who argued that Southeast Asian countries often use residence permits flexibly to balance political and economic interests. In practice, residence permits function not only as administrative control mechanisms but also as instruments that may reinforce power structures and social relations, creating differences between affluent migrants and those experiencing precarious conditions.

Therefore, the issue of residence permit abuse in Indonesia cannot be separated from global, regional, and local dynamics involving legal, economic, and social factors. Immigration policy reform and improved early detection systems are considered important not only to maintain legality and national security but also to ensure that residence permit systems are implemented fairly, equally, and without discrimination.

A comparison with other Southeast Asian countries shows that Indonesia's approach to handling residence permit violations still faces several limitations, particularly regarding inter-agency coordination and the use of supporting technology. Luong (2020) explains that law enforcement efforts in Malaysia targeting undocumented migrants and overstayers involve close cooperation between the Royal Malaysian Police and the paramilitary organization RELA. Although large-scale operations and deportations may be administratively effective, these approaches also receive criticism from a human rights perspective.

Meanwhile, Huong and Vu (2023) observed that Vietnam has implemented digital tracking systems and cross-border cooperation with China to address offenders who misuse residence permits for illegal economic activities. This approach demonstrates a more technology-based and coordinated mechanism compared to Indonesia. Ford et al. (2012) also highlighted Indonesia and the Philippines in relation to weak coordination between police and immigration authorities in detecting human trafficking networks that exploit immigration status loopholes. Similar challenges exist in Indonesia, where the misuse of temporary visas and fake work permits remains difficult to detect due to limited data integration and specialized training.

International Amnesty (2010) further noted that Indonesia, along with Malaysia and Singapore, has been used as a transit area for transnational criminals from several countries, including India, Bangladesh, and African countries. In this situation, the role of police in identifying visa runners and residence permit abusers is important; however, the effectiveness of enforcement remains dependent on international cooperation, including cooperation with Interpol.

Additionally, UNODC (2019) noted that tourist visas are frequently misused by international drug traffickers in countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. This finding emphasizes the importance of strengthening law enforcement surveillance capacity and analytical skills to identify patterns of transnational crime. While Indonesia continues to rely on administrative approaches such as deportation, Luong (2020) found that other countries, such as Vietnam, have developed more proactive and intelligence-based strategies.

Overall, Indonesia still faces challenges in areas such as the digitalization of surveillance systems, cross-border training, and database integration between immigration authorities, police, and other law enforcement institutions. These comparisons indicate the importance of strengthening technical capacity, international cooperation, and the balance between immigration enforcement and human rights protection in addressing contemporary migration challenges.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research method to obtain an in-depth understanding of the social dynamics underlying the abuse of residence permits by foreign nationals in Southeast Asia. The qualitative approach is used to examine the phenomenon based on relevant information and perspectives obtained from secondary sources.

The data collection technique used in this study is library research, which involves collecting data and information from various secondary sources, including books, scholarly journals, policy reports, academic articles, and relevant official documents. These sources are critically analyzed to gain an understanding of the phenomenon of residence permit abuse by foreign nationals and the legal responses implemented within the Southeast Asian region.

The collected qualitative data are analyzed using the Miles and Huberman (1992) data analysis technique, which consists of three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The information obtained from literature and other sources is reduced into key themes, including patterns of visa abuse, conditions of vulnerable migrants, and existing regulations. The data are then presented in thematic narratives to facilitate the interpretation process. The analysis is conducted inductively, allowing conclusions to emerge from patterns identified in the collected data.

To ensure data validity, triangulation is conducted by comparing information from different sources, including official immigration documents, media reports, and statements from informants. Through this approach, the study aims to produce a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

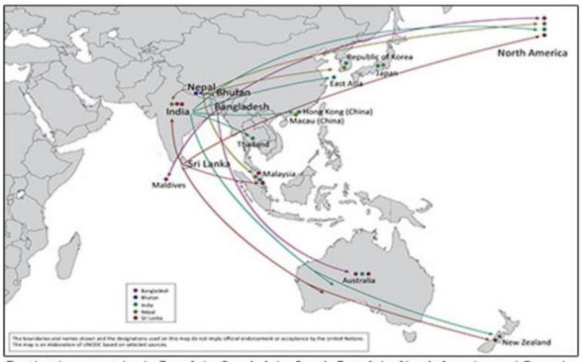
A. Distribution of Immigrants in Southeast Asia

The phenomenon of residence permit abuse by foreign nationals in Southeast Asia cannot be separated from the increasing intensity of international migration within the region. Cross-border mobility in Asia occurs through both legal and irregular channels, including labor migration, education, tourism, and migration facilitated through unlawful networks. Southeast Asia, with its strategic geographical position, economic growth, tourism development, and varying levels of immigration regulation among countries, has become an important destination and transit region for international migrants.

Migration flows within Southeast Asia are influenced by various socio-economic factors, including differences in economic development, employment opportunities, political instability, and humanitarian conditions in migrants' countries of origin. These conditions have contributed to the emergence of irregular migration patterns, including migrant smuggling activities and the exploitation of immigration systems. In this context, residence permits become an important legal instrument for regulating foreign nationals' presence; however, weaknesses in immigration oversight may create opportunities for misuse.

A report published by UNODC illustrates that countries such as India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka represent significant sources of migrant smuggling routes connected to various destinations, including Southeast Asia. These migration routes do not operate independently but form part of broader transnational migration networks connecting South Asia, Southeast Asia, East Asia, North America, and Oceania (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Migrant Destination Routes



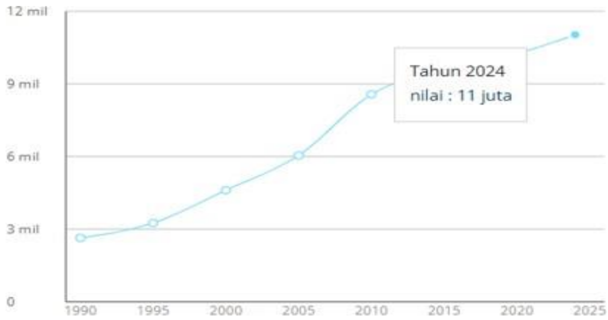
Destination countries in East Asia, South Asia, South-East Asia, North America and Oceania for the smuggling of migrants from South Asia

Source: UNODC (2023)

The increasing number of international migrants in Southeast Asia has created greater challenges for immigration governance, particularly regarding the monitoring of foreign nationals' legal status. Based on migration trend data (Figure 2), the number of international migrants in Southeast Asia reached approximately 11 million people in 2024, compared with around 3 million in 1990 (International Data Stock, 2024). This significant increase demonstrates that Southeast Asia has developed into an important migration destination, driven by economic opportunities, tourism expansion, improved transportation access, and social and humanitarian factors affecting migrants' countries of origin.

The growth of international migration also increases the possibility of immigration violations, including overstaying, misuse of tourist and business visas, and repeated visa renewal practices commonly known as "visa runs." These practices demonstrate how migration systems designed to facilitate temporary mobility may become vulnerable when legal status does not correspond with the actual activities conducted by foreign nationals.

Figure 2. Migration Data in Southeast Asia

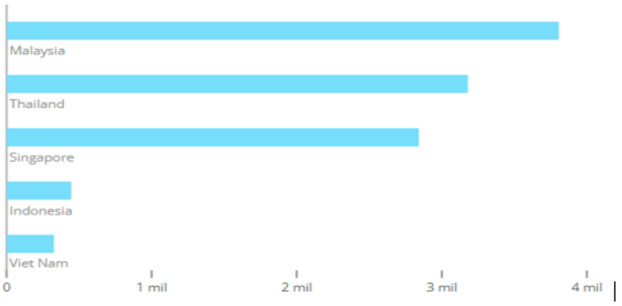


Source: International Data Stock (2024)

The distribution of migrants across Southeast Asian countries shows different patterns of migration concentration. Based on migration data (Figure 3), Malaysia records the highest number of international migrants in the region, followed by Thailand and Singapore, which each accommodate between approximately 2.5 and nearly 4 million migrants (International Data Stock, 2024). These countries have become major migration destinations due to their economic opportunities, labor markets, and tourism sectors.

In comparison, Indonesia and Vietnam have relatively smaller migrant populations. However, a smaller number of foreign residents does not eliminate immigration challenges. Indonesia, in particular, continues to face difficulties in monitoring foreign nationals due to its geographical characteristics, large territorial coverage, and challenges related to cross-agency data integration. This condition creates challenges in detecting potential misuse of residence permits, particularly when foreign nationals engage in activities inconsistent with their immigration status.

Figure 3. Countries with the Highest Immigrant Numbers in Southeast Asia



Source: International Data Stock (2024)

The relationship between migration volume and immigration control challenges has been highlighted in previous studies. International Amnesty (2010), Ford et al. (2012), and Luong (2020) emphasized that countries experiencing significant migration flows face greater pressure in balancing economic interests, migration openness, and immigration enforcement. The presence of foreign nationals contributes positively to economic development and international connectivity; however, insufficient regulatory oversight may create opportunities for the misuse of immigration facilities.

One of the most common forms of residence permit misuse occurs through the exploitation of tourist visas. Foreign nationals may enter legally using short-term visit permits intended for tourism, social visits, or limited business activities, but subsequently engage in activities beyond the permitted scope. These activities may include working as digital nomads, foreign language instructors, or participating in tourism-related economic activities without appropriate work authorization.

Countries such as Thailand and Indonesia have experienced the emergence of a "visa tourism economy," where certain foreign nationals repeatedly utilize tourist visas or visa runs to maintain long-term residence while generating income. This practice illustrates the gap between formal immigration status and actual activities conducted by foreign nationals. Therefore, the increasing movement of international migrants in Southeast Asia requires stronger immigration oversight to ensure that residence permits function effectively as instruments of legal regulation rather than becoming mechanisms that enable administrative abuse.

B. Forms and Patterns of Residence Permit Abuse in Southeast Asia

The increasing mobility of foreign nationals across Southeast Asia has created various challenges in maintaining effective immigration control. Although residence permits are designed as legal instruments to regulate the presence and activities of foreign nationals, weaknesses in monitoring mechanisms have created opportunities for misuse. Residence permit abuse occurs in various forms, including the misuse of tourist visas for employment purposes, overstaying, document forgery, and the use of business visas as instruments to facilitate illegal activities.

These patterns demonstrate that residence permit abuse is not merely an administrative violation but is also connected with broader issues involving labor regulation, transnational crime, human trafficking, and national security. Various studies indicate that similar patterns of abuse occur across Southeast Asian countries, although each country applies different approaches in responding to such violations.

1. Misuse of Tourist Visas for Employment

One of the most common forms of residence permit abuse in Southeast Asia is the misuse of tourist visas for employment activities. Tourist visas are generally granted for temporary purposes, such as tourism, family visits, or limited social activities. However, in practice, some foreign nationals utilize these permits to conduct economic activities without obtaining appropriate work authorization.

This phenomenon has been identified in several Southeast Asian countries, including Malaysia and the Philippines. Muhlisa and Roisah (2020) revealed that in Malaysia, a number of foreign nationals used tourist visas to engage in economic activities without official authorization. As a response, Malaysian authorities conducted police-led enforcement operations, including sweeping operations and deportations. However, these approaches have also received criticism due to concerns regarding potential human rights violations in immigration enforcement practices.

Furthermore, Cahyadi and Yasa (2023) explained that in Indonesia and the Philippines, temporary visas, including tourist visas, have been exploited by human trafficking networks to manipulate victims' migration status. Through this method, victims may appear to have legal immigration status while remaining vulnerable to exploitation. This situation is further complicated by weaknesses in coordination between police institutions and immigration authorities in detecting and responding to such violations.

UNODC (2019) further emphasized that tourist visas are frequently exploited by international criminal networks, including drug trafficking organizations, which take advantage of weaknesses in immigration surveillance systems to enter and operate within national territories.

These findings demonstrate that the misuse of tourist visas extends beyond immigration administration issues. The phenomenon reflects the intersection between immigration control, labor regulation, migrant protection, and national security. Therefore, addressing tourist visa abuse requires stronger coordination between immigration authorities, law enforcement institutions, and regional cooperation mechanisms.

2. Overstay

Overstaying, or remaining in a country beyond the period authorized by an immigration permit, represents one of the most frequently occurring forms of residence permit abuse in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. Although overstaying may occur due to negligence or lack of awareness regarding immigration obligations, several studies indicate that it may also represent a deliberate strategy used by foreign nationals to avoid stricter immigration requirements.

Sutarwati (2016), through research conducted in Bali, found that a number of foreign nationals used tourist visas as a means to remain in Indonesia for longer periods while engaging in unauthorized employment activities. Such practices resulted in joint enforcement efforts between police and immigration authorities, including investigations and deportation measures.

Similarly, Surbakti et al. (2021) highlighted that individuals who overstay may also become involved in criminal activities, including online fraud and fraudulent investment schemes. This indicates that overstay cases cannot be viewed solely as administrative violations but must also be examined within the context of law enforcement and security risks.

The issue of overstaying has also become a concern in Thailand, where foreign nationals exceeding permitted stay periods are considered one of the factors contributing to the vulnerability of the country to transnational economic crimes. In response, Thai immigration authorities have developed specialized mechanisms to address this issue.

Meanwhile, Misman et al. (2017) reported that Malaysia has implemented enforcement operations targeting overstayers through cooperation between police institutions and civilian enforcement bodies. However, similar to other countries in the region, these operations have received criticism regarding potential human rights implications.

Therefore, overstay represents a multidimensional immigration issue involving legal compliance, security concerns, and migrant protection. Effective responses require an integrated approach that combines immigration enforcement, law enforcement cooperation, and respect for migrants' rights.

3. Forgery of Visa or Sponsorship Documents

Forgery of visa and sponsorship documents represents a more complex form of residence permit abuse because it involves deliberate manipulation of immigration procedures. This practice includes the use of fraudulent work permits, fictitious sponsorship documents, and identity manipulation to obtain or maintain immigration status illegally.

Huong and Vu (2023) found that human trafficking networks frequently manipulate victims' immigration status through fraudulent documents, including false work visas and temporary residence permits. Such practices allow exploitation activities to continue while creating the appearance of legal migration status. The effectiveness of law enforcement responses is often limited by challenges in detecting fraudulent documentation and insufficient coordination between police institutions and immigration authorities.

Ford et al. (2012) also identified that fraudulent documents are commonly used by international organized crime networks, including narcotics-related groups, which exploit weaknesses within visa systems in Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines.

Meanwhile, Huong and Vu (2023), Luong (2020), and Thai and Sinh (2025) indicated that Vietnam has developed digital tracking mechanisms to detect fraudulent visas and monitor foreign nationals involved in immigration violations. Compared with these developments, Indonesia's technological integration for immigration monitoring remains at an earlier stage and has not yet been fully implemented across relevant institutions.

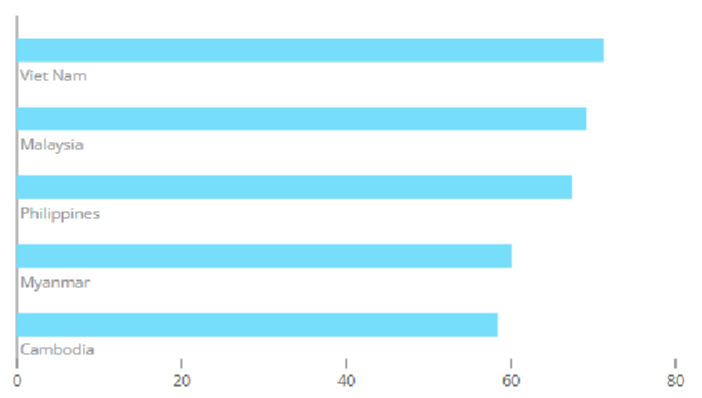
In Indonesia, Sutarwati (2016) also highlighted that investor ITAS permits may be misused through unauthorized sponsorship arrangements, allowing foreign nationals to establish illegal businesses without adequate supervision.

These findings demonstrate that document forgery affects not only immigration security but also public confidence in the integrity of legal and administrative systems. Therefore, strengthening document verification mechanisms and improving investigative capacity are important elements in preventing systematic abuse of residence permits.

4. The Use of Business Visas for Criminal Activities

The misuse of business visas for criminal activities represents another significant pattern of residence permit abuse in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. This practice generally involves foreign nationals entering a country under the justification of conducting investment or business activities while using such status to facilitate unlawful activities.

Figure 4. Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia



Source: International Data Stock (2024)

Data from the Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CTDC) partners show that between 2002 and 2023, Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and the Philippines recorded high proportions of female victims of human trafficking based on the locations where exploitation occurred. Although comprehensive global trends remain unavailable, the regional data illustrate that exploitation occurs not only in destination countries but also within transit areas and countries of origin.

This phenomenon demonstrates the relationship between migration systems and transnational criminal activities. Legal migration channels, including tourist visas, business visas, and humanitarian visas, may be exploited as entry mechanisms for illegal activities when monitoring systems are inadequate.

In Indonesia, Nurmafadyatun et al. (2025) identified cases involving the misuse of investor stay permits (ITAS) in Bali, where foreign nationals established unauthorized businesses without fulfilling applicable licensing requirements. Such practices not only violate immigration regulations but may also negatively affect local communities and economic governance.

UNODC (2019) similarly emphasized that business visas are frequently used by transnational criminal networks, including drug trafficking organizations, as a means of entering countries while concealing their actual intentions. Business identities may function as a cover to avoid stricter monitoring and law enforcement scrutiny.

Furthermore, Huong and Vu (2023) found that in Vietnam, foreign nationals have exploited business residence permits to conduct illegal economic activities. In response, the Vietnamese government has developed digital monitoring systems and strengthened cooperation with Chinese law enforcement agencies to address crimes involving business residence permits.

In Indonesia, weaknesses in monitoring mechanisms, limited data integration between immigration authorities, police institutions, and relevant ministries, remain challenges in preventing this type of abuse. Therefore, the misuse of business visas demonstrates that residence permit violations are closely connected with broader legal, economic, and security issues. Strengthening inter-agency cooperation and modernizing immigration monitoring systems are necessary steps to prevent residence permits from becoming instruments for facilitating criminal activities.

C. The Role of Privilege and the Precariat in the Overstay Phenomenon

The phenomenon of residence permit violations in Southeast Asia cannot be separated from the social and economic conditions experienced by different groups of foreign nationals. The occurrence of overstay and other forms of residence permit abuse does not always occur within the same social context, as migrants may experience different levels of access, protection, and vulnerability depending on their nationality, economic background, and social position. In this context, the concepts of privilege and precariat provide perspectives for understanding the unequal experiences of foreign nationals within immigration systems.

1. **Privilege: The Special Entitlements of Foreign Nationals from Developed Countries**

The existence of certain advantages experienced by foreign nationals from developed countries, particularly those from Western Europe, Australia, and the United States, illustrates the influence of social and cultural privilege within the context of residence permit enforcement in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, foreign nationals from these countries may receive greater tolerance when committing administrative violations, such as overstaying or misusing visa categories. Such differences in treatment are not only influenced by legal considerations but are also related to social perceptions and assumptions regarding their background.

Foreign nationals from developed countries are often associated with positive stereotypes, such as being highly educated, economically capable, and contributing to tourism and economic development. These perceptions may influence how immigration violations are viewed by society and authorities, causing certain violations to be considered less serious compared to similar violations committed by migrants from developing countries. This condition corresponds with the findings of Ford et al. (2012), which indicate that migrant legal status is not determined solely by formal immigration regulations but may also be influenced by factors such as nationality, social class, and broader socio-political conditions.

From the perspective of law enforcement, limitations in international cooperation mechanisms and cross-border legal procedures may also affect the handling of violations committed by foreign nationals from developed countries. Muhlisa and Roisah (2020) highlighted that Indonesian law enforcement institutions continue to face limitations related to resources and access in conducting cross-border investigations. Furthermore, differences in political and economic influence between countries may create additional considerations for authorities when dealing with foreign nationals from countries with stronger diplomatic positions.

This situation demonstrates that unequal treatment in immigration enforcement may create disparities between different groups of migrants. If such conditions continue, they may weaken public trust in the fairness of immigration governance and create legal uncertainty. Therefore, evaluation of social perceptions and enforcement practices remains important to ensure that immigration regulations are implemented consistently and fairly.

2. **The Precariat: The Economic and Life Insecurity of Migrants**

In contrast to foreign nationals who benefit from social privilege, migrants from South Asian countries such as India and Bangladesh, as well as migrants from several African countries, often experience greater vulnerability within Southeast Asian immigration systems, including Indonesia. The misuse of residence permits among these groups is frequently associated with limited legal migration opportunities, economic pressure, and unstable socio-political conditions in their countries of origin.

Global inequality between developed and developing countries has contributed to migration becoming a survival strategy for many individuals. Unlike migrants who receive greater social acceptance, vulnerable migrant groups are more exposed to immigration raids, detention, and deportation. Maringka (2017) documented that migrants from vulnerable backgrounds often work in informal sectors, such as construction, port-related employment, and domestic services, where labor protections are limited and the risk of exploitation is higher.

In this situation, residence permit violations may occur in the form of overstaying due to difficulties in extending work permits or the use of tourist visas to participate in informal economic activities. These violations are often related to limited access to legal employment opportunities rather than purely criminal intentions.

Furthermore, Ford et al. (2012) explained that vulnerable migrants may become involved in survival-based activities, including informal trading, small-scale illegal economic activities, and, in more extreme situations, exploitation networks such as human trafficking. These conditions are further intensified by weak coordination between immigration authorities and law enforcement institutions, as well as limited legal protection for vulnerable migrants. Therefore, some migrants involved in residence permit violations may also be considered victims of broader structural problems within migration governance.

This phenomenon reflects how immigration systems are influenced not only by legal frameworks but also by economic inequality, social conditions, and differences in access to protection. Migration therefore represents a broader reflection of global inequality and unequal experiences within immigration enforcement.

3. The Convergence of Privilege and the Precariat

The interaction between privilege and precarity demonstrates that social status and nationality do not always provide permanent legal security for foreign nationals in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia. Foreign nationals who initially benefit from social privilege, such as migrants from Western European countries, Australia, or the United States, may receive more flexible treatment in immigration monitoring. However, changing economic or social circumstances may transform their position into one of vulnerability.

Situations such as losing employment opportunities, experiencing financial difficulties as digital nomads, or facing global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic may place previously privileged migrants in conditions of legal and economic uncertainty. In these circumstances, they may experience difficulties related to visa renewal, overstaying, or administrative violations.

Research by Ford et al. (2012) shows that immigration systems in Southeast Asia are not entirely neutral, as enforcement practices may be influenced by racial, social, and economic factors. Migrants with privileged backgrounds may receive greater tolerance when facing administrative violations. However, when their circumstances change, they may still become subject to strict immigration procedures and legal consequences.

This condition is also supported by findings from the Journal of Immigration & Administrative Affairs (2024), which emphasizes the importance of early detection functions carried out by police intelligence in identifying residence permit abuse. When monitoring mechanisms are not implemented effectively, both vulnerable migrants and previously privileged migrants may experience similar outcomes, including legal uncertainty, deportation risks, and administrative sanctions.

Therefore, the relationship between privilege and precariat illustrates that residence permit regulation is not merely a technical administrative mechanism. It also reflects broader issues related to social position, access to information, economic capacity, and the ability of migrants to maintain their legal status within the host country.

D. Factors Underlying the Abuse of Residence Permit

The abuse of residence permits by foreign nationals cannot be viewed solely as a form of legal violation, but also as a phenomenon influenced by broader global dynamics and structural conditions. Various factors contribute to the occurrence of residence permit abuse, including changes in global mobility patterns, economic inequality between countries, humanitarian conditions, and differences in immigration governance and enforcement capacity.

One of the factors contributing to residence permit abuse is the development of the digital economy and increasing global mobility. The emergence of digital nomads, remote workers, and international entrepreneurs operating through online platforms has changed migration patterns, allowing individuals to maintain longer stays in foreign countries while not always complying with the intended purposes of their residence permits. This condition demonstrates that migration regulations face challenges in adapting to new forms of mobility. Ford et al. (2012) emphasized that residence permit systems may operate differently for certain groups, particularly migrants from developed countries, where social and economic advantages can influence the flexibility of legal status. As a result, residence permits may function not only as administrative instruments but also as mechanisms influenced by broader socio-political conditions.

Another significant factor is the existence of social and economic disparities between countries. Differences in economic opportunities between developed and developing countries encourage irregular migration movements toward Southeast Asia, which is often considered to provide greater economic opportunities and relatively accessible migration pathways. According to Sutarwati (2016), countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore frequently become destinations or transit points for foreign nationals from South Asia and Africa seeking economic opportunities, with some individuals exploiting weaknesses in immigration regulations to maintain their stay.

Furthermore, conflict, armed conflict, and humanitarian crises contribute to the complexity of residence permit violations. Migrants and refugees from countries experiencing instability, including Myanmar, Syria, and Yemen, may remain longer in transit countries such as Indonesia and Thailand due to uncertainty regarding resettlement opportunities. UNODC (2019) explained that undocumented migration conditions may be exploited by human trafficking networks to conceal labor exploitation and other illegal activities. At the same time, destination countries may experience difficulties in responding effectively due to limited coordination between relevant institutions.

Another important factor relates to weaknesses in legal frameworks and immigration enforcement capacity. Challenges such as limited numbers of immigration investigators (PPNS), complex deportation procedures, administrative limitations, and potential corruption within certain institutions may reduce the effectiveness of immigration control. Luong (2020) highlighted that enforcement approaches in Malaysia, including sweeping operations and mass deportations, have received criticism due to concerns regarding human rights violations, while also revealing weaknesses in administrative verification and migrant screening systems. Similarly, Maringka (2017) noted that weaknesses in enforcing residence permit regulations in Indonesia may reduce the deterrent effect of immigration law, particularly for individuals with greater financial resources or political influence.

Therefore, residence permit abuse represents a complex phenomenon resulting from the interaction between global mobility trends, economic inequality, humanitarian challenges, and the capacity of states to regulate migration effectively. Addressing this issue requires not only stronger legal enforcement but also improved institutional capacity and migration governance mechanisms that are responsive to contemporary migration dynamics.

E. Regulatory Gaps in Indonesia and Southeast Asian Countries

Regulatory gaps within immigration systems in Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, represent one of the important factors contributing to the persistence of residence permit abuse. Although many countries have established immigration regulations, the rapid development of global mobility, technological changes, and new migration patterns have created challenges that existing legal frameworks have not fully anticipated.

In Indonesia, Law No. 6 of 2011 on Immigration provides the legal foundation for regulating foreign nationals' entry, stay, and activities within Indonesian territory. However, the regulation has not fully addressed emerging migration patterns, including the increasing presence of digital nomads and foreign remote workers who may remain in Indonesia for extended periods while using tourist or business visit permits. Furthermore, residence permit monitoring systems remain fragmented between immigration authorities, police institutions, and the Civil Registration and Population Agency (DUKCAPIL). This lack of integrated data management affects the effectiveness of early detection mechanisms for identifying residence permit violations.

In addition, legal responses toward residence permit violations in Indonesia are still predominantly conducted through administrative measures, such as fines and deportation, rather than criminal prosecution. According to Maringka (2017), enforcement practices remain inconsistent, particularly when dealing with foreign nationals who possess stronger financial capacity or social influence. This situation may reduce the deterrent effect of immigration regulations and create opportunities for repeated violations.

Similar challenges can also be observed in other Southeast Asian countries. In Malaysia, the Immigration Act 1959/63 provides broad authority for immigration officials to detain foreign nationals who violate immigration regulations. However, the regulation does not specifically address informal employment practices that frequently occur within contemporary migration patterns. Enforcement operations involving RELA (People's Volunteer Corps) have also received criticism due to their large-scale sweeping approach, which has raised concerns regarding human rights protection, as discussed by Luong (2020).

Thailand faces different challenges, particularly due to the significant role of the tourism sector in its economy. The practice of "visa runs," where foreign nationals repeatedly leave and re-enter Thailand to extend their stay, remains one of the mechanisms used to avoid stricter immigration controls. UNODC (2019) highlighted that Thailand's immigration regulations have not yet fully developed mechanisms to distinguish between genuine tourists and individuals who use tourism-related visas as a means of informal migration and employment.

Meanwhile, Vietnam and the Philippines encounter challenges related to visa sponsorship mechanisms. In Vietnam, fictitious companies have reportedly been used to provide illegal sponsorship for foreign nationals by exploiting weaknesses in document verification systems. In the Philippines, humanitarian visa mechanisms, which were initially designed to provide protection for vulnerable groups, have also been exploited by human smuggling networks. These conditions demonstrate that immigration regulations that are insufficiently adaptive, overly flexible, or lacking effective monitoring mechanisms may become opportunities for more complex forms of residence permit abuse.

These findings indicate that regulatory gaps across Southeast Asian countries remain a significant challenge in addressing residence permit abuse. Immigration regulations need to adapt to changing global migration patterns while strengthening institutional coordination, digital monitoring systems, and cross-border cooperation. A more integrated regional approach is therefore required to address residence permit violations effectively while maintaining a balance between immigration control, national security, and migrant protection.

CONCLUSION

The abuse of residence permits in Southeast Asia cannot be viewed merely as an administrative violation but as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by global mobility dynamics, economic inequality, digitalization, migration challenges, and weaknesses in immigration governance systems. The findings indicate that residence permit abuse occurs through various forms, including overstaying, misuse of tourist and business visas, and exploitation of regulatory gaps. This phenomenon is also closely related to differences in migrants' social and economic conditions, where privilege may provide certain groups with greater access and tolerance, while precarity may encourage vulnerable migrants to violate immigration regulations due to limited legal migration opportunities and economic pressures.

Addressing residence permit abuse requires improvements in immigration governance through stronger institutional coordination, integrated monitoring systems, and adaptive regulations that respond to changing patterns of global mobility. Enhanced cooperation between immigration authorities, law enforcement institutions, and relevant agencies is necessary to strengthen early detection and enforcement mechanisms. In addition, immigration control should be implemented through approaches that balance national security interests with human rights protection. At the regional level, stronger cooperation among Southeast Asian countries is essential to address cross-border residence permit violations and related transnational challenges effectively.

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