

The transnational social contract in the Global South

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Abstract

As far back as 2003, the Asian Times famously declared that migrant remittances constitute ‘mother’s milk for poor nations’ (Kapur and McHale 2003), affirming the importance of labour migration for countries across the Global South. Yet, almost two decades later, scholarly work on the impact of labour mobility on the international politics of postcolonial states remains particularly fragmented. Ultimately, how does labour emigration affect state-society relations across postcolonial states of the Global South? This paper begins by identifying how the post-independence social contract granted a set of rights and socio-economic entitlements to citizens across postcolonial states in return for their political acquiescence. Yet, the inability of the postcolonial state to sustain high post-independence levels of welfare provisions led to two effects: firstly, the development of “emigration management institutions,” which sought to encourage and regulate citizens’ labour emigration; and, secondly, the widening of a “remittance-welfare gap,” which occurs when labour migration remittance rates outpace state-sponsored welfare provision. Together, these developments led to the transformation of a postcolonial social contract into a “transnational social contract,” as states leverage citizens’ access to labour mobility and foreign-based welfare through de facto and de jure forms of transnational coercion.

State-facilitated emigration flows sustain institutions that offer nominal parchment protection against widening social and economic inequality, with the opportunity to emigrate serving both as a proxy for truncated state welfare provisions at home, as well as the consolidation of state power over the postcolonial citizen. Methodologically, this is demonstrated via a comparison of paired cases across the Global South with a common set of countries of destination: the study identifies two least-likely labour emigration cases in South Asia (Nepal) and the Middle East (Jordan) to the Gulf Cooperation Council states, selected for the purposes of theory building through covariation and within-case analysis. The paper analyzes how cross-border mobility has reshaped state-society relations at home by making access to emigration central to citizens’ socio-economic trajectory. It is noted that the argument shifts existing conversations away from counterproductive economic approaches to migration and labour by allowing us to instead think of political practice in ways unconstrained by methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Shiller 2003). The paper highlights the heretofore-unaccounted diversification of state-like practices in migration management across the Global South, from re-territorialization to the

formal imbrication of unaccountable labour recruiters and security officials into these processes. Overall, this paper introduces the notion of the “transnational social contract” to demonstrate how labour emigration offers no guarantee that abandoning a given state’s territorial confines means escaping from forms of control and subjectification. An interregional analysis is offered, one that also acts as a corrective to the dominance of South-North migration research and provides a novel framework on the impact of migration upon non-Western states.

Biography

Gerasimos Tsourapas works on the international relations of the Middle East and the broader Global South, with a particular focus on the politics of migrants, refugees and diasporas. He is currently the Principal Investigator of a five-year European Research Council Starting Grant project on migration diplomacy. He is a Senior Fellow of the UK Higher Education Academy, and has been elected as the incoming Chair of the Ethnicity, Nationalism & Migration Studies (ENMISA) Section of the International Studies Association (2023–25). Gerasimos is the author of *The Politics of Migration in Modern Egypt – Strategies for Regime Survival in Autocracies* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and *Migration Diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa – Power, Mobility and the State* (Manchester University Press, 2021). He co-edited, with Maria Koinova, a special issue on 'Diasporas and Sending States in World Politics' for *International Political Science Review*. His work has also appeared in *International Studies Quarterly*, *European Journal of International Relations*, *International Migration Review*, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* and other leading journals.

Gerasimos has received numerous awards. *The Politics of Migration in Modern Egypt* was awarded the 2020 ENMISA Distinguished Book Award by the International Studies Association and was shortlisted for the British International Studies Association's L.H.M. Ling Outstanding First Book Prize. His work has also been recognised by the American Political Science Association: Best Dissertation on Migration & Citizenship, (2016), the International Studies Association (Martin O. Heisler Award, 2017) and the Middle East Studies Association of North America (Graduate Student Paper Prize, 2015). He also received the inaugural 2021 ENMISA Emerging Scholar Award by the International Studies Association. Gerasimos served as a Fellow at the Center for European Studies, Harvard University (2019–20) and The American University in Cairo (2013–14). He received a BA in Economics and Political Science from Yale University (2006), an MSc in International Political Economy from the London School of Economics and Political Science (2007) and a PhD in Politics from School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London (2016).