DIJEMSS: Dinasti International Journal of Education Management and Social Science
E-ISSN: 2686-6331
P-ISSN: 2686-6358
https://dinastipub.org/DIJEMSS dinasti.info@gmail.com +62 811 7404 455
DINASTI PUBLISHER

DOI: https://doi.org/10.38035/dijemss.v7i1.5475
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Received: 18 August 2025 | **Revised:** 21 September 2025 | **Accepted:** 14 October 2025

Procedural Formality, Substantive Reality: Evaluating Migrant Worker Protection in the Indonesia-Malaysia One Channel System (OCS)

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Abstract: This research analyzes the effectiveness of the Indonesia-Malaysia cooperation in implementing the One Channel System (OCS) concerning the enhanced protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (IMW) in the domestic sector. The primary issue investigated is the suboptimal substantive protection for IMW, despite the new policy framework established by the 2022 MoU. Using a qualitative research method involving policy document analysis and stakeholder interviews, this study examines the dynamics of OCS implementation. The findings indicate that the improvement in protection is more procedural, such as the legalization of tens of thousands of placements, rather than substantive progress, which relates to the improvement of workers' real conditions. The effectiveness of OCS on the ground is undermined by three main factors: an asymmetry of national interests between Indonesia's focus on protection and Malaysia's orientation towards fulfilling labor demands; weak bilateral oversight and law enforcement mechanisms; and the continued operation of non-procedural recruitment channels by illegal brokers. This study recommends strengthening joint oversight institutions and enforcing strict law enforcement to bridge the gap between formal policy and on-the-ground reality.

Keywords: One Channel Placement System, Migrant Worker Protection, Indonesia–Malaysia Cooperation, Protection Regime

INTRODUCTION

The bilateral relationship between Indonesia and Malaysia is one of the most crucial and multifaceted in Southeast Asia. It is built upon deep-seated similarities in culture, history, religion, and language that have been established since before both nations achieved independence (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2018). This shared heritage, often referred to by the term serumpun (of the same stock), has fostered a unique dynamic of both profound kinship and occasional tension. Officially, diplomatic relations were established on August 31, 1957, the day Malaysia declared its independence, with Indonesia being one of the first countries to extend recognition and immediately elevate its representative office to an embassy (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2018).Over the decades, this

relationship has matured into a strong and interdependent partnership, particularly in the economic sector, where Malaysia stands as a significant trading partner and a key investor in Indonesia (Sakti, 2023). The political relationship has been institutionalized through mechanisms like the Annual Consultation at the Head of Government level and the formation of an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) to provide recommendations on bilateral issues (Konsulat Jenderal Republik Indonesia, 2008).

However, this proximity has also been a source of friction. The shared cultural heritage, including traditional arts like the reog dance, wayang kulit (shadow puppetry), and batik, has sometimes led to disputes over cultural ownership, creating tensions that require careful management based on mutual respect (Konsulat Jenderal Republik Indonesia, 2008). Amidst this complex tapestry of cooperation and contention, no issue is more central, sensitive, and consequential than that of labor migration. For decades, millions of Indonesian Migrant Workers (IMW) have sought better livelihoods in Malaysia, becoming an indispensable part of the Malaysian economy, particularly in sectors such as construction, plantation, and domestic services (Susilo, 2023). These workers play a significant role in Malaysia's economic development while simultaneously contributing vital remittances to Indonesia's economy, which not only supports their families but also bolsters the nation's foreign exchange reserves (Rodani, 2022). This mutual dependence Malaysia's need for labor and Indonesia's need for employment opportunities has made the governance of labor migration a permanent and critical fixture on the bilateral agenda.

Despite this mutual dependence, the protection of IMW, especially those in the highly vulnerable domestic sector, has remained a persistent and complex challenge. Numerous reports have documented systemic issues of exploitation, abuse, and inhumane working conditions, placing consistent pressure on the Indonesian government to take decisive action to protect its citizens abroad (Nidatya et al., 2023). The vulnerability of these workers is often rooted in the recruitment process itself, which has long been plagued by a lack of transparency and legal certainty. A primary example of this systemic failure was the

System Maid Online (SMO), a platform created and operated unilaterally by the Malaysian immigration authorities. The SMO allowed Malaysian employers to recruit workers directly, including those already in Malaysia on other visas, effectively bypassing official Indonesian government channels and regulations (Sarah, 2021).

The Indonesian government vehemently opposed the SMO, arguing that it violated existing bilateral agreements and made workers acutely susceptible to exploitation. The system lacked mechanisms for pre-departure training, contract verification, and background checks on employers, which are critical components of the Indonesian protection framework (Pramudyani, 2022). By allowing employers to convert individuals on tourist visas into domestic workers, the SMO facilitated a process that rendered these workers "invisible" and "illegal" from the perspective of Indonesian law, making it nearly impossible for the government to monitor their conditions or provide consular assistance when abuse occurred (Irawan et al., 2023). The workers recruited through this channel often faced deception, with their actual jobs and employers differing from what was promised, leaving them trapped and without legal recourse (Nidatya et al., 2023). The continued operation of the SMO by Malaysia, despite Indonesian objections, was perceived as a breach of trust and ultimately led Indonesia to impose a temporary moratorium on sending all domestic workers in mid-2022, signaling a critical breakdown in bilateral cooperation and highlighting the urgent need for a new, mutually respected framework (Paksi & Renta, 2023).

In response to this diplomatic impasse and the pressing need for a structured and genuinely protective framework, the governments of Indonesia and Malaysia returned to the negotiating table. This culminated in the signing of a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Domestic Migrant Workers on April 1,

2022. The centerpiece and most critical component of this agreement was the establishment of the

One Channel System, as the sole legal mechanism for the recruitment and placement of IMW in the domestic sector (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2022). This new framework was explicitly designed to close the loopholes that enabled exploitation under the previous regime.

The OCS MoU introduced several transformative and legally binding provisions aimed at enhancing worker protection from end to end. Firstly, and most importantly, it established the OCS as the exclusive channel, explicitly banning all other recruitment procedures and invalidating systems like the SMO (Kantor Staf Presiden, 2022). Secondly, it mandated the use of standardized and legally registered employment contracts outlining specific rights and obligations, including a minimum wage to ensure fair compensation (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2022). Thirdly, in a landmark provision, the MoU stipulated a "zero-cost" policy for workers, requiring employers in Malaysia to bear all placement-related fees, thereby freeing workers from the debt bondage that had long plagued them (BP2MI, 2022b). Furthermore, the framework mandated comprehensive social security coverage, requiring workers to be enrolled in Indonesia's social security program (BPJS) before departure and in Malaysia's scheme (PERKESO/SOCSO) upon arrival (BP2MI, 2022b). To ensure effective implementation, the MoU also called for the creation of a Joint Task Force (JTF) tasked with integrating the countries' respective digital systems—Indonesia's Sipermit and Malaysia's ePPax and MyIMMS—to create a transparent and traceable digital trail for every worker (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2022). On paper, the OCS represented a comprehensive and robust system designed to finally address the systemic vulnerabilities of IMW.

While the OCS represents a significant formal improvement, its real-world effectiveness remains in question, creating a critical gap between policy intent and practical outcomes. This study analyzes the implementation of this cooperation through the theoretical lens of K.J. Holsti (1987), who provides a foundational framework for understanding international relations. Holsti defines international cooperation not as a state of harmony, but as a conscious and deliberate process where states adjust their behavior and coordinate policies to achieve shared objectives that cannot be met alone (Holsti, 1987). However, he crucially notes that this process is often constrained by fundamental barriers, including conflicting national interests, asymmetries in power, and a lack of trust and enforcement mechanisms. The OCS is a textbook case of this dynamic, representing a deliberate attempt at policy coordination that is continuously challenged by the differing priorities of Indonesia and Malaysia.

Furthermore, to dissect the specific implementation challenges, this research employs the nuanced analytical framework of Gunawardana (2018), who examines the complex interaction of three co-existing regimes that govern labor migration: the broker regime, the regulation regime, and the protectionism regime. The broker regime refers to the network of intermediaries—both formal and informal—that facilitate migration, where the state itself can act as a "broker" to promote remittances while simultaneously trying to control exploitative private agents. The regulation regime encompasses the formal rules, laws, and bilateral agreements that are designed to govern the process, but which often fail in their implementation and enforcement. Finally, the protectionism regime describes the often-conflicting policies of both sending and receiving states. The receiving state (Malaysia) enacts protectionist policies to control its labor market, which can marginalize migrant workers, while the sending state (Indonesia) engages in its own form of reactive protectionism to defend its citizens abroad when the system fails. This three-regime framework provides a powerful tool to move beyond a simple analysis of policy success or failure and instead deconstruct why and how implementation gaps occur.

The existing body of literature has identified persistent problems in the Indonesia-Malaysia migration corridor. Studies have highlighted ongoing implementation failures (Sakti, 2023) , deep-rooted structural challenges like the dominance of informal channels (Fauziah et al., 2024) , and the limited role of international organizations (Andayani, 2016). However, a significant analytical gap remains in understanding how the specific interplay between the broker, regulation, and protectionism regimes shapes the on-the-ground reality for IMW under the new OCS framework. No study has systematically used this multi-regime lens to explain the precise mechanisms that cause the disconnect between the OCS's formal promises and the continued vulnerability of workers.

Therefore, this research aims to fill that gap by critically evaluating the post-OCS landscape. By examining the persistent dualism in the broker regime, the enforcement deficit in the regulation regime, and the fundamental clash of interests in the protectionism regime, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive explanation for the system's limited success. The central research question guiding this article is: "How has the protection of Indonesian domestic migrant workers in Malaysia improved following the implementation of the One Channel System (OCS)?"

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative methodology to provide a deep and nuanced understanding of the implementation of the One Channel System (OCS). The central research question—which seeks to understand how and why the protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (IMW) has changed—necessitates an approach that goes beyond mere quantitative measurement. A qualitative design is uniquely suited to unravel the complex processes, power dynamics, and stakeholder perspectives that shape the reality of a bilateral policy on the ground, something that numerical data alone cannot capture (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In line with the principles of qualitative inquiry, this approach allows the researcher to serve as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, emphasizing the critical importance of social and political context in interpreting the findings (Cresswell, 2009). The objective is not to measure the frequency of outcomes, but to construct a rich, contextualized explanation for the persistent gap between the formal architecture of the OCS and the substantive protection experienced by workers.

Data for this research was gathered using a combination of document analysis and in-depth interviews. The document analysis involved a systematic review of a wide range of primary and secondary sources to build a comprehensive understanding of the policy landscape. These sources included: the official 2022 MoU text, Indonesian legislation such as Law No. 18 of 2017 concerning the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers, official reports and press releases from BP2MI and relevant Malaysian ministries, previous academic studies and journal articles on Indonesia-Malaysia labor migration, and credible media reports that documented implementation challenges. This documentary evidence formed the basis for understanding the formal rules and public discourse surrounding the OCS. To gain deeper, first-hand insights, this was supplemented by semi-structured, indirect interviews conducted through written correspondence with key informants, including an official from the Directorate General of Manpower Placement at Indonesia's Ministry of Manpower, who provided a governmental perspective on the policy's execution and challenges.The data analysis process was conducted systematically through a qualitative, iterative approach.

Following the initial stage of data reduction and organization (Sugiyono, 2013), the core analytical strategy employed was thematic analysis. This process was explicitly guided by the theoretical framework of the study. All data from documents and interviews were coded and categorized into themes corresponding to Gunawardana's (2018) three-regime framework: the broker regime, the regulation regime, and the protectionism regime. This allowed for a structured analysis of the key forces shaping the implementation of OCS. Finally, a synthesis

was performed wherein the findings from the thematic analysis of on-the-ground realities were juxtaposed with a content analysis of the formal rules of the OCS. The resulting "implementation gap" was then interpreted through the theoretical lens of K.J. Holsti's (1987) theory of international cooperation to explain the underlying dynamics of conflicting national interests and power asymmetries that hinder the full realization of the policy's protective goals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the One Channel System (OCS) following the 2022 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Indonesia and Malaysia presents a significant paradox in the governance of labor migration. On one hand, the initiative has achieved considerable procedural advancements, marking a clear departure from the previously fragmented and often chaotic recruitment landscape. The most compelling evidence of this procedural success is the dramatic surge in the number of officially documented Indonesian Migrant Workers (IMW) entering Malaysia. Data from Indonesia's Agency for the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (BP2MI) reveals a monumental increase in official placements, from a mere 563 individuals in 2021, before the full implementation of the MoU (BP2MI, 2021), to 43,125 in 2022 and soaring further to 72,257 in 2023 (BP2MI, 2022a, 2023). This formalization is not trivial; it represents a foundational layer of protection by providing each registered worker with a legal identity, a standardized employment contract, and, theoretically, access to state-sanctioned complaint and protection mechanisms.

However, this paper argues that this notable procedural success masks a more troubling and persistent reality: the substantive protection of these workers—defined as the tangible, felt improvement in their daily working conditions, safety, and overall well-being—remains severely limited and elusive for many. The formal architecture of the OCS, while impressive on paper, has failed to fundamentally alter the on-the-ground vulnerabilities that have long plagued IMW in the domestic sector (Prianto et al., 2023). This significant gap between policy intent and practical outcome is not accidental but is a direct consequence of deep-seated, structural weaknesses. These weaknesses can be systematically deconstructed by examining the conflicting dynamics within three interdependent governance frameworks, as conceptualized by Gunawardana (2018): the broker regime, the regulation regime, and the protectionism regime. The failure to reconcile the contradictions within and between these regimes is the central reason why the OCS has yet to fulfill its promise of comprehensive protection.

The Broker Regime: The Unresolved Duality of Formal and Informal Channels

The most immediate and damaging challenge to the efficacy of the OCS lies within the broker regime, which continues to be characterized by a destructive duality between the state-sanctioned formal system and a deeply entrenched, highly adaptive informal system. In principle, the OCS was designed to establish a singular, transparent, and accountable recruitment channel managed exclusively by government-registered Indonesian Migrant Worker Placement Companies (P3MI). This was intended to professionalize the recruitment process and eliminate the predatory role of unregulated intermediaries, or "calo," who have historically been the primary architects of worker exploitation (Gunawardana, 2018). The formal regime, when it functions as intended, provides a structured pathway that includes verification, training, and documentation, thereby creating a baseline of security for the worker.

In practice, however, this formal system has failed to achieve the exclusivity mandated by the MoU. The informal broker regime has not been eradicated; it has merely adapted, continuing to operate in the shadows and often in parallel with the official channel. This informal network thrives for several reasons. Firstly, it exploits the low levels of migration literacy among prospective workers, many of whom come from rural areas with limited access to information and are more susceptible to deception (Fauziah et al., 2024). Secondly, the official OCS process, with its multiple bureaucratic steps and digital requirements, is often

perceived as slow, complex, and costly for employers, creating a fertile market for informal brokers who promise a faster, cheaper, and simpler, albeit illicit, alternative (Sarah, 2021). The very complexity of the official system inadvertently incentivizes both workers and employers to seek out these riskier, unregulated shortcuts.

The persistence of this informal channel has devastating consequences, as it operates entirely outside the purview of the OCS's protective mechanisms. Workers recruited through these backdoors are systematically stripped of their rights from the outset. A common practice is debt bondage, where brokers impose exorbitant and non-transparent recruitment fees, trapping workers in a cycle of debt before they even begin their employment, directly contravening the "zero-cost" principle of the MoU (Sarah, 2021). Another prevalent form of exploitation is contract substitution, where a worker signs a contract with specified terms in Indonesia, only to have it replaced with a far less favorable one upon arrival in Malaysia, often with lower pay, longer hours, and different job responsibilities (Longgarini et al., 2023). Furthermore, these informal networks are notorious for the illegal confiscation of passports and other personal documents by either the broker or the eventual employer, a tactic used to exert control, restrict freedom of movement, and prevent workers from seeking help or escaping abusive situations (Longgarini et al., 2023).

This exploitation is also deeply gendered. As Gunawardana (2018) argues, within such unregulated migration systems, female domestic workers are often treated as "commodities" to be traded rather than as individuals with rights and agency. This dehumanizing perspective significantly increases their vulnerability to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse in the isolated environment of a private home. The failure of the OCS to become the sole channel for placement is, therefore, its most fundamental flaw. As research on other migration corridors has shown, simply banning informal brokers without providing an efficient, accessible, and affordable official alternative is a counterproductive strategy. It merely drives the informal market further underground, making it more dangerous and increasing the risks for the very people the policy aims to protect (Deshingkar, 2021). The OCS, in its current state, has created a safer option but has not succeeded in making it the only viable one, thus perpetuating the cycle of vulnerability it was designed to break.

The Regulation Regime: A Comprehensive Framework Undermined by an Enforcement Deficit

The second critical weakness is found within the regulation regime itself. The 2022 MoU is, by many measures, a well-designed and comprehensive legal instrument. It codifies a wide array of crucial protections that directly address the historical vulnerabilities of domestic workers. These include the establishment of the OCS as the exclusive channel (BP2MI, 2022b), the stipulation of a minimum wage of RM1,500 (Kementerian Luar Negeri Republik Indonesia, 2022), the mandatory use of standardized employment contracts that are registered with both governments, the landmark "zero-cost" placement policy for workers, guaranteed rights to communication with family and officials, the right for workers to hold their own passports, and the requirement for dual social security coverage in both Indonesia (BPJS Ketenagakerjaan) and Malaysia (SOCSO/PERKESO) (BP2MI, 2022b). This framework, on paper, provides a powerful legal basis for ensuring workers' rights and dignity.

However, these robust regulations have largely proven to be a "paper tiger" due to a severe and systemic enforcement deficit. The strength of any law lies in its implementation, and in the case of the OCS, the gap between the written rules and their on-the-ground application is vast. The primary locus of this failure is the weak and inconsistent supervision and law enforcement within the destination country, Malaysia (Paksi & Renta, 2023). While the MoU outlines clear obligations for employers, there is little evidence of a proactive monitoring system or consistent punitive action against those who violate the terms. Employers who illegally deduct salaries,

confiscate passports, or enforce excessive working hours often face minimal consequences, creating a climate of impunity (Prabowo, 2020).

This enforcement challenge is structurally compounded by the unique nature of domestic work. Unlike a factory or plantation, a private household is an isolated and largely invisible workspace, making external monitoring by labor inspectors practically impossible. This isolation creates a situation of extreme power asymmetry, where the worker is completely dependent on the employer for food, lodging, and communication with the outside world. This dependency fosters an environment of fear, where workers are often too intimidated to report abuse or contract violations, fearing retaliation that could range from verbal abuse to physical violence, or immediate termination and deportation. As research on migrant access to justice has consistently shown, without safe, trusted, and genuinely accessible complaint mechanisms, legal rights remain theoretical for the most vulnerable workers (Farbenblum et al., 2013).

This regulatory failure is further aggravated by bureaucratic and technical hurdles that have hindered the OCS's implementation. A key promise of the system was the creation of an integrated digital platform to ensure transparency and traceability. However, the integration of Indonesia's Sipermit system with Malaysia's MyIMMS and ePPax platforms has been beset by delays and technical incompatibilities (Diany, 2022; Nushratu, 2024). The very establishment of a Joint Task Force (JTF) with the stated goal of "accelerating" this integration is a tacit admission that the initial coordination failed (Mediana, 2024). This is not merely a technical glitch; it reflects a deeper lack of coordinated political will and bureaucratic capacity. The practical consequence of this digital fragmentation is a slow, cumbersome, and unpredictable official process. This inefficiency directly undermines the system's appeal and inadvertently pushes both employers and workers toward the faster, albeit illicit, informal channels, thereby sabotaging the core objective of the regulation regime.

A comparative perspective starkly highlights these shortcomings. South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS), for instance, is widely regarded as a best practice because it is a fully state-led, Government-to-Government (G-to-G) model that completely removes private recruitment agencies from the process. This model has proven highly effective in reducing exploitation, lowering migration costs, and increasing transparency (Cho et al., 2018). Similarly, Taiwan's Special Placement Program (SP2T) demonstrates the success that can be achieved through robust digitalization and, crucially, a high degree of compliance and enforcement from the receiving country (Evy & Lonita, 2025). The OCS, by contrast, remains a hybrid model that still relies heavily on private agencies (P3MI) for execution and suffers from a clear lack of enforcement commitment from the destination country, leaving its comprehensive regulations largely aspirational.

The Protectionism Regime: The Fundamental Clash of National Interests

The failures observed in both the broker and regulation regimes ultimately stem from a deeper conflict within the protectionism regime. This conflict arises from the irreconcilable national interests of Indonesia and Malaysia. As theorized by Holsti (1987), international cooperation, even when formalized, remains perpetually constrained when the core priorities of the participating states diverge. The OCS is a prime example of a "fragile compromise" a cooperation born out of mutual necessity but built on a foundation of misaligned interests.

On one side is Indonesia's citizen-centric protectionism. This policy is driven by a dual mandate: the constitutional obligation to protect its citizens wherever they are (UU Nomor 18, 2017), and the significant public and media pressure that arises whenever cases of abuse are publicized. This form of protectionism is often reactive and rights-based, manifesting through strong diplomatic protests, the threat or imposition of moratoriums on sending workers (Paksi & Renta, 2023), and the provision of consular "rescue" services such as legal aid, shelters, and repatriation for victimized workers. For Indonesia, the "success" of the OCS is measured primarily by the safety and well-being of its citizens.

On the other side is Malaysia's economic protectionism. This policy is not aimed at excluding migrant labor but at controlling and managing it to serve specific domestic economic needs. It functions to channel a steady supply of low-cost, flexible labor into low-status sectors, such as domestic work and plantations, that are largely rejected by the local workforce (Zaki et al., 2022). The primary goal is to maintain economic stability and satisfy the demands of Malaysian households and industries. From this perspective, measures that increase the cost or complexity of hiring—such as enforcing minimum wages, guaranteeing days off, or adhering to strict bureaucratic procedures—are often viewed as impediments (Low, 2025). The "success" of the system for Malaysia is measured primarily by the stable and predictable supply of labor.

This fundamental clash of interests Indonesia's rights-based agenda versus Malaysia's economic pragmatism is the root cause of the OCS's implementation gap. It explains why Malaysia has been reluctant to definitively close all non-OCS recruitment channels, as doing so would disrupt the labor supply. It explains why the enforcement of MoU standards against Malaysian employers is inconsistent, as strict enforcement is seen as potentially burdensome. It also explains Malaysia's structural reluctance to ratify key international instruments like the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (C189), which would legally bind it to a higher standard of protection than it is economically or politically willing to provide (Muslim et al., 2024).

The power dynamics in the bilateral relationship further entrench this asymmetry. As the capital-rich destination country, Malaysia holds significant structural leverage, allowing it to de facto dictate the terms of implementation on its own soil, regardless of the formal text of the MoU (Low, 2025). This power imbalance forces Indonesia into a perpetually reactive posture. The high-profile "rescue" missions conducted by the Indonesian embassy in Kuala Lumpur, while necessary and commendable, are clear symptoms of a preventive system that is failing. True success would be measured by a lack of victims to rescue, not by the efficiency of the rescue operations. Therefore, the OCS, while a procedural step forward, has not resolved this core conflict. While it has created a formal framework for cooperation, genuine protection will remain limited until both countries align their national interests toward a shared vision that balances labor supply with human dignity. s will remain partial, reactive, and substantively incomplete.

CONCLUSION

The enhancement of protection for Indonesian domestic Migrant Workers (IMW) in Malaysia following the implementation of the One Channel System (OCS) has been more procedural and formal than substantive. The OCS framework has successfully created significant normative progress through the establishment of a single legal channel and the standardization of employment contracts. However, its effectiveness on the ground is significantly undermined by three primary factors: the persistence of an illegal broker regime operating outside the system, a severe implementation gap in the regulation regime due to weak supervision and law enforcement, and a clash with Malaysia's protectionism regime, which prioritizes economic interests over comprehensive protection. This failure in protection reflects a cooperation built on misaligned national interests and a weak institutional mechanism. Therefore, achieving genuine protection requires a sincere political commitment from both countries, uncompromising law enforcement, and structural reforms toward a stronger and more independent joint oversight mechanism.

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