

Great deeds still to match fine words

Behind The Headlines by **Bunn Nagara**



Asean issues may have seen an abundance of talk, but they can still do with more substance.

FOR as long as anyone can remember, there has never been a shortage of meetings on or by Asean.

Observers were once amazed that the Asean Secretariat could handle an average of one meeting for every calendar day throughout the year.

Since then, that number has grown to an average of three meetings per calendar day, or four meetings per working day, year-round.

Many of these meetings are of course specific sectoral exchanges among various levels of officials below the ministerials. But they are all official discussions, without including “Track Two” meetings among organisations like think tanks and “Track Three” meetings among civil society groups.

Track Two meetings have now also grown in number, although on a far more modest scale than Track One “G-to-G” meetings. While Track Three events have seldom gained traction over funding and compatibility issues, Track Two deliberations have no such problem.

With this abundance of meetings about Asean, one might expect talks to be repetitious and boring or at least have some basic themes of the region sufficiently understood. However, that is not necessarily so.

One such occasion was the Foreign Policy Study Group’s recent Roundtable Conference on “Strengthening Regional Integration in Asean Through Multi-channel Dialogue” at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations in Kuala Lumpur.

From Malaysia, it was said that “moderation” as concept and theme would be a platform for the global exchange of ideas. From there, common strands among different communities and traditions could be identified for greater bonding.

Malaysia, more than perhaps any other country, has sizeable minorities that inform its political fabric. Questions of social equilibrium based on thought and sentiment as much as ethnicity lie at the core of its nation-building efforts.

So any international campaign for moderation ought to have Malaysia leading it. Thus the Global Movement of Moderates, while resonating pertinently around the world, has a natural home here.

The next discussion on moderation's opposite, extremism, came from Indonesia. While both moderation and extremism may be found everywhere, some environments seem more conducive to one or the other.

Economic injustice and the extremes of wealth and poverty were said to fuel extremism, radicalism and terrorism in Indonesia. Some terrorists may have middle-class backgrounds, but destitution still makes for desperation and educational deficiencies, providing fertile ground for breeding extremist hatred.

Indonesia's previous authoritarian decades were said to have aggravated, rather than eased, such dodgy extremes of wealth and poverty.

Intriguingly, although Malaysia also had some terrorist kingpins, they operated in Indonesia rather than at home.

From Thailand, it was said that southerners still seek their rightful cultural space rather than political autonomy as such.

Yet violent attacks in the southernmost provinces are still routinely attributed to "separatists" even with little or no evidence for it.

Southern Thais, mostly Muslim-Malay, still lack official recognition of their communal status from whichever mainstream party happens to govern from Bangkok. What real hopes can peace talks have?

As observed elsewhere, the Democratic Party is the only party in Thailand that does not champion autonomy for the south yet consistently wins election landslides there.

The question remains: why is it so difficult to grant some working recognition to the Muslim-Malay community, while still staying clear of autonomy issues?

There is just one Asean country whose record of violence in these matters rivals if not exceeds Thailand's: Myanmar. Specifically, the problem is between Myanmar's status quo and the Rohingya minority in Rakhine state.

An official view from Myanmar offered the Roundtable – although it was not asked – was that the government had no genocide policy as some of its critics have claimed. That is technically true.

The violence in Rakhine was also said to be not a religious conflict. That too is correct in strict religious terms, because neither Buddhist (the assailants') nor Muslim (the Rohingyas') teachings clash.

However, there is an undeclared policy of acquiescence in a private or privatised campaign against the Rohingyas amounting to cultural genocide.

Mobs have also torched Rohingya villages and slaughtered the inhabitants with seemingly little government intervention.

The point appears to be to alienate the indigenous Rohingyas from the land, by officially denying them citizenship by alleging their illegal migrant status from Bangladesh, then by unofficial moves to scare them away or just kill them.

Myanmar's reforms have seen various policy improvements, including reconciliation with ethnic insurgency groups, except for the Rohingya issue.

More development may not resolve but possibly worsen this, if moneyed interests eye the mineral wealth in the land where the Rohingyas live.

There were also perennial regional issues that cut across national borders. The Roundtable was reminded of the media's significance in Asean community building, neglected as it is by Asean itself.

The media is a basic socio-cultural institution in any community. Yet Asean's grand design of a Socio-Cultural Community pays scant regard to the status and development of Asean media.

Not only are Asean media associations few and far between, there is still no dedicated region-wide media linking the Asean countries.

The prospect of an Asean newspaper was mooted, since in (largely) electronic form it would be most cost-effective.

Media not only links people but makes them collectively aware of one another in a shared region. Media also enhances the identity of the society it serves and further distinguishes that society from others around it, including larger and more powerful ones.

Another regional issue discussed concerned illegal migrants and human trafficking.

There was no argument that more safeguards and better law enforcement would be desirable.

An academic speaker ventured further to ask what motivated people to make huge sacrifices and take great risks to leave their homeland to work on strange shores abroad.

It was as if the obvious answer, economic advancement with a chance of migrating to a more developed economy, was insufficient.

It was said that as a social scientist it was necessary to ask such questions. But by the same token, with an emphasis on science, Occam's Razor says no unnecessarily complex answer is required if a simple one would suffice.

All the sciences have so far flourished on that principle. The social sciences should not differ significantly from the physical sciences there, on pain of becoming less scientific.

The final session focused on encouraging youth participation in Asean and Asean-related activities. It is always vital to promote youth interest to secure the future.

How may Asean adults get the younger generation more involved in Asean matters and all that Asean represents and purports to be?

Sometimes doing less may achieve more: leave the younger generation to get on with it once some basic parameters are in place.

Europe had the popular Eurovision Song Contest, an effective socio-cultural effort aimed at youth. East Asia had Asia Bagus, but it originated in Japan and was broadcast to only four Asean countries (besides those in North-East Asia) before fizzling out.

The Eurovision Song Contest continues its success after its founding in 1956, a year before the European Economic Community (today's EU).

Established around the European Broadcasting Union, it again shows the power of the media in motivating societies, whether in news or entertainment form.

With enlightened and committed sponsorship, Asean socio-cultural development can do at least as well.

Bunn Nagara is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia