

Communicating with the Asean Community

By Tan Sri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan

CHALLENGE: A skilful communication plan is needed to bring the regional bloc closer to the peoples of member nations

IN less than 14 months, on Dec 31, 2015, the Asean Community will come into being. As chair of Asean for the year, Malaysia has the heavy responsibility of ensuring that as much of the blueprints for the establishment of the Asean Community have been implemented by that date.

Malaysia will also have the signal honour and privilege of formally declaring the Asean Community at an event with all the Asean leaders probably present. There will no doubt be ceremonies and celebrations in all the Asean capitals to mark the occasion.

It will be a historic day for the 10 nations and peoples of Asean. But what will be different when the Asean Community is in place? How will the governments of Asean convey to their peoples and to the world at large that something tangibly new and epochal has come into being? When the ceremonies and celebrations are over, what will have changed?

This will probably be the greatest challenge facing the governments, to convey to their peoples and to the world at large that a credible Asean Community will be in place by Dec 31 next year.

When Malaya gained independence and Malaysia was formed the changes were visible and palpable. A new polity, a new flag, the stentorian calls of Merdeka!, a new (and later altered) Federal Constitution, a king, Parliament. The list goes on.

Every Southeast Asian state with the exception of Thailand, the only country that did not fall under colonial sway, had the same remarkable experience when they reclaimed their sovereignty and independence, and assumed a fresh identity anchored in their past.

When the European Community came into being, its impact was immediate and powerful — European citizenship, European currency, European common market, a directly elected European Parliament and European laws, to name a few. The European Community is now even more integrated as the European Union (EU). What, in comparison, will be the visible differences with an Asean Community?

There will be few comparable to the EU's. Asean deliberately avoided the EU model for good reasons. There will be no Asean citizenship, no Asean Parliament, no Asean currency and no Asean laws. Though the Asean Community has been slowly taking shape over the decades and it has its institutions as well, none are as empowered as the supranational institutions of the EU. Being less empowered, they also impact less obviously and less substantively on Asean's national polities, and the consciousness and daily lives of the people.

How then will the Asean Community spirit, idea and reality be communicated to the people in a way that excites them and makes them feel they belong?

Every Asean government will presumably be working hard at this. The expectations on Malaysia will be particularly high because it will be the Asean Chair and the prime minister has built a good image internationally. Malaysia must seize this once-in-a-decade opportunity to shine and stamp its mark.

In this regard, it would not be a surprise if a Cabinet Committee serviced by the Foreign Ministry and headed by no less than the prime minister or his deputy is established to draft and implement a



A balloon carries the Asean logo at the main venue

of the Myanmar International Convention Centre. Asean governments face the challenge of getting across the Asean Community spirit to their people in a way that excites them and makes them feel they belong.

master plan for Malaysia's Chairmanship of Asean next year. A communication plan that extends over the entire year will be an integral and critical part of such a master plan.

There has to be a sustained communication blitz on Asean next year in which all media platforms, government agencies, the business sector, non-governmental organisations and think tanks participate.

Such a communication plan would perhaps seek to communicate, clearly and effectively, and in terms easily understood by the layman, at least, the following things:

WHAT will it mean to be in an Asean Community? What is the Asean Community and what is it not? There is much confusion out there.

THE Asean Community will continue to be a work-in-progress beyond 2015. The European experience was similar. The European Community continued to be consolidated after its founding.

COMMUNITY building, especially on a regional scale, involves much effort in the face of major challenges. Occasional disappointments and even reverses are not unlikely, as Europe has been witnessing for several years now. Surprises could even occur in the year the Asean Community is proclaimed.

ASEAN brings important benefits to the country, the region and to the many stakeholders within them. Among others, it empowers otherwise weak nations; strengthens regional peace and stability through cooperation; enhances the competitiveness of businesses and the prosperity of the people; and enriches and enlivens cultures and societies.

THE Asean organisation and the important landmarks in the history and evolution of Asean.

THE intense work done by all the organs of Asean in many critical areas, such as trade, investment, finance, infrastructure and connectivity, poverty reduction, narrowing of income disparities among Asean countries, corporate governance, anti-corruption, confidence building, counter-terrorism, nuclear non-proliferation, humanitarian disaster relief and food security.

ASEAN'S enormous and often under-appreciated contributions to cooperative peace and prosperity in the wider Asia Pacific region through key platforms, such as the Asean Regional Forum, the Asean Defence Ministers Plus, Asean Plus Three and the East Asia Summit, where it engages the world's most powerful states.

MALAYSIA'S initiatives and contributions in the last five decades and at present, both as a member state of Asean as well as individually, such as in the peace efforts in southern Philippines and southern Thailand.

MALAYSIA'S own vision and plans for Asean as Chairman for the critical year of 2015. The prime minister himself will be the best spokesperson here.

Skillful communication is key to the success of all policies. Such a communication plan, crafted in a creative and interesting manner to also involve forums and exhibitions and engage various stakeholders, will go a long way towards making the Asean Community a felt reality and bring it closer to the hearts and minds of the people.

Tan Sri Mohamed Jawhar Hassan is Chairman of ISIS Malaysia