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ASEAN BEYOND 2015: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A COMMUNITY?

The ASEAN Community Beyond 2015

by

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The ASEAN Community Beyond 2015¹ **Carolina G. Hernandez, PhD**

What is a Community?

At its very least, whenever the word ‘community’ is mentioned, the first thing that most of us would think of is a group of people banded together for some common purpose. That a community is about people must be the underlying idea behind many official statements made by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that the ASEAN Community its leaders and other elites hope to realize at the end of this year needs to be a people-oriented, if not a people-centered community. It is also behind a recent argument made elsewhere that a community is about people, and that ASEAN ought to put the peoples of Southeast Asia at the center of building that community.²

The ASEAN Community and its Pillars

That the process behind the vision of an ASEAN Community began a few years ago is generally recognized. Its beginning is usually traced to the ASEAN Vision 2020 forged in this very capital following the Asian financial crisis of 1997. That Vision is about realizing an ASEAN that is a concert of Southeast Asian nations (governed by the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation [TAC], the Declaration of ASEAN as a Zone of Peace,

¹ Remarks prepared for Session 3 – ASEAN Beyond 2015: What Does it Mean to be a Community? of the 29th Asia-Pacific Roundtable hosted by ISIS Malaysia and ASEAN ISIS, Kuala Lumpur, 1-3 June 2-15.

² See for example Carolina G. Hernandez and Motoko Shuto, “ASEAN-Japan Strategic Partnership in Southeast Asia: The Socio-cultural Pillar”, in Rizal Sukma and Yoshihide Soeya, Editors, *Beyond 2015: ASEAN-Japan Strategic Partnership for Democracy, Peace, and Prosperity in Southeast Asia* (Tokyo and New York: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2014), p. 58.

Freedom and Neutrality [ZOPFAN], and the Bangkok Treaty declaring ASEAN as a Nuclear-Weapons Free Zone [SEANWFZ], among others) a partnership in dynamic development, a community of caring societies, and an ASEAN that is open to the world. Subsequent development of this seminal idea is found in the Bali Concord II which declared the establishment of an ASEAN Community “comprising of three pillars, namely, political and security cooperation, economic cooperation, and socio-cultural cooperation that are closely intertwined and mutually reinforcing for the purpose of ensuring durable peace, stability and shared prosperity in the region”.³ The document further elaborated these three pillars thus: “(a) the ASEAN Security Community [is] to ensure that countries in the region live at peace with one another and with the world in a just, democratic and harmonious environment, (b) the ASEAN Economic Community [is] to create a stable, prosperous and highly competitive economic region in which there is a free flow of goods, services, investment, capital, and greater mobility of professionals, talents and skilled labour; and (c) the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community [is] to promote a community of caring societies and foster regional identity”.⁴

It would take a few more years for ASEAN to develop blueprints that would constitute the *Roadmap for an ASEAN Community 2009-2015*, adopted in Cha-am, Thailand on 1 March 2009. This roadmap provides key ideas on how the ASEAN Community’s three pillars are to be realized through various cooperative activities and institutions.

³ The Declaration of ASEAN Concord II, Bali, Indonesia, 7 October 2003.

⁴ *Ibid.*

The political-security pillar is now known as the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC) and is described as consisting of three main elements based on the principles of political development (in democracy, rule of law, human rights, among other values), ASEAN centrality in its relations with its Dialogue Partners and the regional security architecture of Southeast Asia, and an understanding of security as comprehensive. These elements are a rules-based community of shared values and norms, a cohesive, peaceful, stable and resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security, and a dynamic and outward-looking region in an increasingly integrated and interdependent world.

On the other hand, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) represents a single market and production base, a highly competitive economic region, a region of equitable economic development, and a region fully integrated into the global economy.

The ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) for its part has over 300 action lines to ensure that its 6 characteristics are realized. These are human development, social welfare and protection, social justice and rights, ensuring environmental sustainability, building the ASEAN identity, and narrowing the development gap.

A closer examination of these three pillars and their blueprints shows that it is only the third pillar whose blueprint clearly commits to the vision of an ASEAN Community that is people-centered. It hopes to realize such a community through various activities in the 6 characteristic elements of the ASCC that are also people-centered and environmentally

friendly with the goal of achieving sustainable development for the peoples of Southeast Asia.

Another important observation in regard to the blueprints is that the areas of cooperative activities in the ASCC are truly intrusive of national sovereignty as they address matters of domestic concern such as social justice, human and social development in various spheres including in education, health, religion, and others. And while the ASCC Blueprint also includes human rights, the issue of whether it belongs to the domestic or international domain remains contested in ASEAN official circles, perhaps one reason why the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) began with and continues to focus on a promotion, rather than a protection mandate.

It is my firm conviction that if the enhanced political-security cooperation among the member states of ASEAN and the economic benefits of becoming a single market and production base sought by the economic pillar are not shared among the peoples of ASEAN, then the ASEAN Community we are seeking to realize in 2015 or beyond is beyond reach. The ordinary peoples of ASEAN in the villages and even in urban centers that remain untouched by the benefits of the APSC and the AEC, cannot become stakeholders whose support and participation in the community building process is critical. Unfortunately, despite the rhetoric, the ASCC remains an after-thought, an added-on, despite the fact that only through their buying in the community building process can an ASEAN Community be realized.

The Way Forward

In this regard, ASEAN needs to undertake a serious soul-searching that should include the following:

1. A recognition that 1967 is not the same as 2015 – what has worked then may not work in the same way now. Among many earthshaking changes include those brought about by the technological revolution, especially in information and communication.
2. Consider a more objective and hard set of criteria to determine performance or accomplishment of the Blueprints or other cooperative activities of ASEAN especially for community-building purposes..
3. The flexibility that afforded ASEAN enormous advantages in the past is gone since the ASEAN Way had been institutionalized in the ASEAN Charter. To change an approach to a burning issue would now require an amendment of the Charter, a process that is bound to be tedious, time-consuming and highly contentious.
4. Nonetheless, it is time perhaps to consider amending the constraining elements of the ASEAN Charter, such as equal contribution to its operations, and consensus decision making (i.e., consensus should not be defined as unanimity). In the latter case, might it be feasible to adopt the flexible formula of ASEAN minus X?
5. Put some political will behind the ASCC to ensure it does not remain an after thought. It is necessary to recognize that an elite-centric ASEAN may no longer work in this highly interconnected world in which we all live.

6. Ensure that collective interest is regarded as above national interest as a way of responding to the constraints placed on collective effectiveness by the Westphalian system of bordered sovereign states.

Concluding Remarks

Surely the community building process will remain a work-in-progress for many more years to come. Hastening the process in my view cannot be done without speaking to and involving the peoples of Southeast Asia. They must no longer be treated as mere objects, but as subjects that have a critical role to play in building the ASEAN Community beyond 2015.