



Measures to ensure a people-centred Asean

ENGAGE: *The community needs to get directly involved in Asean-related events*

I WONDER how many people actually notice or pay attention to the many banners and bunting lining some of the major boulevards in Kuala Lumpur, which publicise the upcoming Asean Ministerial Meeting and Post-Ministerial Conferences (AMM/PMC). Those banners and bunting have been there for quite some time. Unfortunately a large number of the city's residents have been away in their hometowns and kampung for the Hari Raya holidays. But there is still time. The 48th AMM and the PMC will begin next week in early August.

The ministerial meeting has indeed been the hallmark of Asean. The regional grouping was established at a ministerial meeting in Bangkok in August 1967. The five foreign ministers who were there to negotiate and sign the Bangkok Declaration - Tun Abdul Razak Hussein, Tun Thanat Khoman, Adam Malik, S. Rajaratnam and Narciso Ramos - are recognised as the founding fathers of Asean.

The AMM of course refers to the meeting among foreign ministers. Over the years other specific ministerial meetings dealing with trade, finance, defence, security, health, tourism, transport, youth and sports and other issues have been held and institutionalised. Yet the AMM/PMC would generate the most interest among diplomats, the media and scholars and researchers, even if public enthusiasm for them is low.

The First Asean Summit in Bali in 1976, held nine years after Asean's establishment was the first meeting among Asean leaders. The Second Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur to commemorate Asean's tenth anniversary in 1977. There was no summit until ten years later in Manila. Subsequently, the leaders met mostly in informal summits. The summit process was actually formalised into an annual affair much later.

Since a few years ago, two Asean summits have been held annually; one, typically held in April, for the Asean leaders to discuss issues exclusively among themselves and decide on Asean initiatives and plans, and the other for them to also meet their counterparts from the dialogue partner countries in the Asean plus One summit, Asean plus Three summit and the East Asia Summit, usually in November.

One of the criticisms against Asean is that it is an elitist organisation. The hundreds of meetings held annually among leaders, ministers, officials and experts do not really concern the people, according to the critics. Lately there have been demands for the voice of the people, civil society and individuals to be increasingly heard and attended to, especially at this crucial moment when member states are poised to declare the establishment of the Asean Community at the end of 2015.

One of Malaysia's declared objectives as chairman is to make Asean a people-centred organisation. The challenge is still enormous. Awareness about Asean is particularly low among Malaysians compared to many of our neighbours. As a start, the government has made such efforts this year as to hold Asean meetings in various parts of the country besides Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya, even in Kota Baru. But these remain intergovernmental meetings. There is minimum involvement of the people who probably have barely noticed those meetings, especially if there isn't wide media coverage given to them.

Less than six months remain for Malaysia to really make an impact as Asean chairman and to drive the people-centred agenda. What can be further done to create greater awareness and move towards a people-centred Asean? The following are some suggestions:

- Views have been expressed about promoting Asean food among the people. I agree and would venture to add that while food festivals featuring Asean cuisine should be encouraged in hotels and restaurants throughout Asean, a dedicated Asean Food Channel should be created for television to popularise Asean cuisine and recipes.
- Sports is a good vehicle for generating popular involvement. It is about time that the SEA Games be rebranded as the Asean Games since the participating countries are all the Asean member states plus Timor Leste which is aspiring to gain membership in Asean. It would be fitting for the next games to be hosted by Malaysia in 2017 to be named the First Asean Games, coinciding with Asean's fiftieth anniversary. The Asean School Games and Asean Para Games can then be placed under the umbrella of the Asean Games.
- Since football is a popular game in Asean, the Suzuki Cup tournament could be supplemented with another annual Asean Cup tournament which could be held with the support of the Asean private sector .
- One sure way of publicising Asean is through travel and tourism. As part of their CSR, airlines in Asean, in particular the flag carriers should be encouraged to prominently display the Asean logo on at least one of their aircraft along similar lines as Star Alliance or One World. Member states should agree to have the Asean flag flown besides the national flags more widely at government buildings, public places, business premises and hotels and shopping malls. More vigorous efforts should be made to open "Asean lanes" at airports, ports and border crossing points in all Asean countries.
- Member states could agree preferential rates for mail, telephone and telegraphic charges within Asean to encourage people-to-people connectivity.

The AMM could provide the opportunity for Asean to consider further steps to realise a people centred Asean. While the banners and bunting are meant to attract the people's attention, would the ministers ensconced at the Putra World Trade Centre be able to decide on matters that really matter to the people? The call is theirs.

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