

## Sultan Nazrin outlines five mega challenges faced by Asean

By TASNIM LOKMAN - August 28, 2017



**Sultan of Perak, Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah when delivering the opening speech before opening the Asean Future Forward book at Sheraton Imperial Hotel. (pix by EIZAIRI SHAMSUDIN)**

KUALA LUMPUR: Asean's role in remaining open, moderate and inclusive was among the five major challenges it faces, outlined by Sultan of Perak, Sultan Nazrin Muizzuddin Shah today.

Asean, he said, has wisely kept itself open to the world, and is where it is today not due to isolationism but to the courage and leadership of its former and current leaders who have fully embraced globalisation.

In his royal address at the launch of the book, "Asean Future Forward Anticipating the Next 50 Years", published by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, Sultan Nazrin said Asean would have not survive, let alone thrive, in today's world if its leaders and people were not open and welcoming of positive external influences that blend well with regional norms and values.

However, he said it would be remiss not to note that the populist backlash against globalisation is also present in Asean.

"To some, whereas globalisation once could do no wrong, today it would appear that it can do no right.

"On the economic front, globalisation has brought with it not only blessings but also its curses, on trade and financial liberalisation, on technology and capital, on employment and wages, and on standards of living and quality of life.

"As we know, the debate is still ongoing," Sultan Nazrin, who is the Royal Fellow of ISIS.

Owing to this and other factors, Sultan Nazrin said one can witness in the member states growing social divisions - between those with liberal and conservative values, between urban elites and rural masses, and between older baby-boomers and younger millennials.

He said feelings of disenfranchisement present across classes were felt in the political sphere, while identity and religious politics were resurgent in many parts of the world, including within the West itself and also in Asean.

He said this was dangerous and worrying as it can be seen taking hold among segments of Asean citizens.

Praising Asean's aspirations to be "people-oriented", he said it was also a political-security imperative that must be doubled and redoubled if the community is to remain moderate and inclusive.

Sultan Nazrin said Asean's aim of being truly-people-orientated and people-centred was also one of the mega challenges faced, stating that it needs to prioritise the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

"I am aware that Asean is already taking steps to coordinate the achievement of the three Community Blueprints with the SDGs within the framework of Asean-UN cooperation.

"In view of the gravity and urgency of ensuring the relevance of Asean's efforts to its people, however, I believe that more has to be tangibly done and with greater urgency.

"In addressing the SDGs, Asean governments need to temper their 'economic growth-at-any-cost' attitude and adopt more holistic and inclusive approaches.

"Lack of attention to inclusivity can accentuate social polarisation resulting in political backlashes that could eventually weaken the dynamism and resilience of member states," he said, adding that was not enough to talk about being inclusive but it was imperative to be inclusive.

Another challenge Sultan Nazrin noted was keeping peace at the centre of Asean's purpose which has always confronted the bloc and member states.

After five decades, he said it was easy to forget it was not economical or social reasons that brought them together in the first place but the peace.

"The Asean community today is defined by its three pillars: political-security, economic and socio-cultural.

"It is, however, peace and security that is and must be the overarching prerogative.

"I believe that nothing else can replace the core rationale for Asean unity and coherence. Nothing else has the powerful traction and motivation to drive our actions into the future," he said.

Sultan Nazrin said member states' need to maintain Asean's freedom, neutrality and centrality was also a mega challenge, especially so in a time

of renewed geopolitical competition in the region.

He said Asean's acceptance by all parties, and its centrality – largely demonstrated by its power to convene and act as a hub of cooperation and integration initiatives in Southeast Asia and the larger East Asian region – hinged on its ability to remain free and neutral.

"There is virtually no statesman of any worth, past or present, who has argued that Asean can or should dispense with its neutrality.

"This was the spirit of ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality) which the five founding members of Asean subscribed to," he said.

The last mega challenge, he noted, was of innovation and relevance, stating that its leaders need to be cognizant of the tremendous changes occurring on the global scale.

He said Asean needs to keep envisioning, reimagining and innovating in order to remain relevant, address challenges, and to meet new expectations.

The Sultan of Perak said these five mega challenges was what he felt the Asean Community was facing and will continue to face in the years in the years ahead.