

Opinion

Asean credibility compromised by lack of regional integration

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One of the main outcomes of the Asean Summit held in Kuala Lumpur last December was the appointment of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG) to guide the development of an Asean charter.

The charter is designed as a move towards the establishment of an Asean Community by 2020 founded on three pillars - the Asean Security Community, the Asean Economic Community and the Asean Socio-Cultural Community.

Entrusted to map out the future of Asean, the EPG has been preoccupied with forming new ideas and emulating the best practices from other successful regional organisations in order to make a set of recommendations regarding the contents and purposes of the Asean charter. These recommendations will be submitted to the Asean leaders when they meet at the end of the year.

It is recognised among the Eminent Persons that the Asean Charter will be a document that outlines a corporate body's principles, functions and organisational structure, and that there will be three main elements in the charters of regional organisations: a statement of purpose, the basic principles of the organisation and its institutions. Other elements include membership criteria and the rights and duties of member states.

Last week, Singapore hosted the fourth meeting of EPG on the Asean charter, with special emphasis on the economic pillar. While many discussions focused on the definition of the Asean Economic Community, the reconstruction of the organisation (such as the new responsibilities of the Asean Secretariat), as well as the flexibility of the decision-making process, what was equally significant was the session on consultations by the EPG with regional civil society organisations.

Called "Asean in Consultations with the People", the session encouraged civil society organisations to put across their views vis-a-vis the Asean charter. It is

this process that is open to bottom-up views and inputs. In the past, Asean affairs were discussed and decided among governments and occasionally with a small circle of academics and the corporate world.

The effectiveness of the Asean Charter will require the support of a much broader segment of the people. This, in turn, can engender a sense of belonging among Asean citizens and help them identify their interests with those of the region.

The Solidarity for Asian Peoples' Advocacy (SAPA) spearheaded recommendations on the economic pillar. It reiterated that regionalism is a step towards the advancement of Asean people's interests, that it should go beyond regional integration and incorporate genuine regional solidarity, and that it is the foundation for Asean's venture into external relations.

In realising the Asean Economic Community, the Asean charter should consider the following principles: economic integration based on an element of social protection in economic development; financial and monetary stability; regional harmonisation and complementation in industry, agriculture and services; cooperation in human resource development; protection of labour rights; harmonisation of existing norms and mechanisms to address trans-boundary economic concerns; increased support to small-scale producers to build their potential; sustainability of production and consumption of energy; provision of mechanisms that will help member countries to adhere to the ideals of the charter; and promotion of social dialogue.

The EPG was also debriefed by McKinsey and Company, which had been undertaking a study on the Asean economic integration progress. The findings are somewhat unsurprising with underlining messages of the actual progress on Asean economic integration being largely limited. The study also suggests that while benefits for Asean integration could be large, competition is getting tougher especially from China and India.

The verdict is clear. Either Asean must catch up now with global changes by contouring an effective plan for integration, or risk losing credibility in the long term. As McKinsey elaborated, the success of regional integration requires a rigorous focus on high-impact sectors, workable institutions, a more effective public-private collaboration, and continued support by Asean's leaders.

With regard to the institutional development of Asean, civil society representatives urged the EPG to promote the usage of existing institutions, to make Asean's rules and institutions more adaptable to changing threats and challenges, and to adhere to the principle of automaticity whereby rules and institutions should be invoked or deployed automatically in the event of crisis,

rather than waiting for the initiative of an individual leader.

Aside from bold recommendations regarding necessary principles and the need to reform Asean's institutions, an attempt was also made among civil society organisations to come up with what could best characterise Asean's integration. Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy of Singapore and former ambassador to the UN, proposed the catchphrase "Community of Civilisations".

Based on the fact that Southeast Asia is unique in the sense that peoples from different cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds have lived together in harmony, the defining principle of a "Community of Civilisations" should be embraced in the preamble of the Asean Charter. Furthermore, it also conveys the message of Asean regionalism being people-centred and people-empowered as a means to invigorate cohesion in the region.

Fidel Ramos, a member of the EPG and former president of the Philippines, agreed that in the past, political elites prescribed what was good for the people. The consultations with the civil society organisations not only signified the mindset shift within Asean, but also legitimised the Asean charter as a non-imposed document.

Looking closely, the EPG was very much conscious of making the Asean charter process transparent. The meeting with civil society organisations therefore served such an objective, and in the meantime gave some indications of the progress on the compilation of recommendations to the Asean leaders.

The next challenge facing the EPG is determining to what extent the opinions of civil society organisations are to be valued, and what proportion of these opinions would be incorporated in the recommendations of the EPG to Asean leaders and eventually enshrined in the Asean charter.

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