

Keynote Address

# Beyond Economic Imperatives: Towards A People's ASEAN

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First and foremost, allow me to express my sincere thanks to the Forum organisers for their kind invitation to me to share some thoughts regarding the ASEAN Community. I would like to offer some modest reflections based on the title “Beyond Economic Imperatives: Towards a People's ASEAN.” My approach is, while looking forward, I also take a step back, using a long view of history, to examine some key concepts in this enterprise of community building, while making a few remarks on what is currently taking place and where we are heading.

## **Significance of the ASEAN Economic Community**

It should be recalled that ASEAN was formed as a regional organization in 1967 in the midst of the Cold War, and by 2003 at the Bali Summit, ASEAN state leaders resolved to form the ASEAN Community comprising three pillars by 2020. In keeping with this aspiration, in November 2015, at the Kuala Lumpur Summit, ASEAN Heads of Governments/States declared the formation of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) on 1 January 2016, and set forth a bold plan of the *ASEAN Community 2025 Blueprint: Forging Ahead Together*.

With the centre of the global economic gravity shifting towards Asia, the significance of the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) is fairly clear. AEC is well endowed to be “a single

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market and production base, allowing the free flow of goods, services, investments, and skilled labour, and the freer movement of capital across the region” as envisaged by the policy-makers. As available data shows, with a population of 626 million and a combined GDP of over US\$2.4 trillion (2014 figures), AEC is the third largest economy in Asia (after China and India), the seventh largest in the world, and if the present growth trends continue, it would be the world’s fourth largest economy by 2050.

What this shows is that within a span of about 50 years, ASEAN has evolved from being a regional organization, originally a politico-security architecture comprising five original member-states – a contingent institution which could be dissolved if its members so willed – to become an entity that is potentially more sustainable, mutually beneficial, comprehensive and inclusive. Indeed, as observed by the Asian Development Bank (2016: xxii), ASEAN has advanced from “cooperation by consensus to integration by choice” and a model for regionalism. This is an important milestone in the history of the region whose significance goes well beyond ASEAN and Asia.

While the potential economic benefits or advantages of the AEC are enticing, what of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community? To quote from the *ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community Blueprint 2025*, “At the heart of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) is the commitment to lift the quality of life of its peoples through cooperative activities that are people-oriented, people-centred, environmentally-friendly, and geared towards the promotion of sustainable development” (ASEAN Secretariat 2015b: 103). This is to contribute towards achieving an “ASEAN Community that engages and benefits the peoples and is inclusive, sustainable, resilient, and dynamic” (ASEAN Secretariat 2015b: 104). Indeed the objectives and vision to bring together the 620 million people in ASEAN as articulated in the *ASEAN Community Blueprint 2025* are praiseworthy.

## **Why the Concern for Community?**

With 'community' becoming the buzzword today, let us pause for a moment and ask ourselves why such concern with community and community building, and what this implies. Today, the term 'community' has become fashionable and respectable worldwide, having gone beyond the academic into the political and economic realms, especially when policy-makers and businesses adopt it as part of their road map and branding. While in Europe, the European Community was set up in the late 1950s before it eventually became the European Union, in our part of the world, the concern for a regional 'community' in policy and business circles came to the fore only many decades later. The retrieval of the term from academic and popular usage and given respectability by state and business elites, indicates the power of the word which carries with it a sense of the collective, of peoples and not just elites, a sense of belonging, and an aspiration towards a shared future that is durable, humane and caring. Living in a world divided by great power rivalries, fierce market competition and instrumentalist motivations, the grand endeavour of forging a 'community' of common interests certainly sounds more inclusive and persuasive. It softens the divides of the uneven playing field, the big gaps of winners and losers accentuated by neoliberal globalisation. In sum, the concept of 'community' and community building for the region is more preferred than merely forging ahead with an organisation of member-states like what ASEAN was until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## ***Gemeinschaft and Gesselschaft***

However, 'community' is a complex and elusive concept. It should not simply be grafted onto a group of population and countries if the soul does not reflect the essential ingredients of what constitutes a community. For it to be meaningful and far-reaching policy-wise, it needs to be fleshed out. Historically, the term 'community' (spelt with a big 'C' or a small 'c') has been debated for more than a century, and its usage and meaning has undergone changes and transformation following the Industrial Revolution in the West, and the high levels

of urbanization the world over especially since the urbanization transition at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When the renowned German scholar, Ferdinand Tönnies, published in 1887, his celebrated work, *Gemeinschaft und Gessellschaft* which deals with the transformation from *Gemeinschaft* (meaning ‘community’) to *Gessellschaft* – which was an urbanized industrialised market-driven society) (Abdul Rahman 2008: 120) – Asia and the rest of the contemporary developing world were still rural and agricultural. Their peoples were still living in what could generally be described as *Gemeinschaft* or communities in the original sense.

But today, Asia and ASEAN have fundamentally changed. The high levels of urbanization, industrialisation, rapid economic growth, and integration into a competitive globalised world have ushered in new conditions. This raises a crucial point. The focus of what Tönnies wrote almost 130 years ago, was the “universally endemic clash between small-scale, kinship and neighbourhood-based ‘communities’ and large-scale competitive market ‘societies’” (Harris 2001), an issue still very much pertinent today. According to Tönnies, in *Gemeinschaft* (Community), individuals identify themselves with the wider group, whereas in market Society or *Gessellschaft*, attachment to the larger whole is secondary and instrumental, guided by rational calculation and arbitrary will. In such a society, both “property and labour were transformed into abstract marketable ‘commodities’, their ‘value’ measured by a yet more abstract commodity in the form of money” (Harris 2001: xviii). In short, our society today is driven more by market-defined values of self-interest and profit rather than by humane community values, and more by narrow nationalism than regionalism and cosmopolitanism.

### **Economic Growth and Societal Growth: Re-embedding Economy in Society**

The problematic here is: while welcoming the establishment of the AEC and its economic imperatives of economic integration, growth and profit, we should not be too euphoric that this would automatically lead to the strengthening of the ASEAN Community,

including its Socio-Cultural Pillar. We have to take note of Tönnies' reminder that in modern society, individuals tend to identify – not with the collective, the community – but more with their own interest. Thus identifying with the community has to be consciously nurtured and not taken for granted.

In his treatise, *The Great Transformation*, which is a classic study of economic history, Karl Polanyi (1944) [1957: 57] noted with concern the disembedding of the economy from social relations, due to the expansion of the unregulated market arising from the growth of capitalism (see also Beckert 2007). His message is a poignant reminder to architects of the ASEAN Community. If we use Polanyi's theory of the 'double movement' (advance of capitalism and resistance against its excesses) as a frame of reference, it can be said that the agenda of community building essentially constitutes attempts at re-embedding the economy in society, and linking economic growth to societal growth to make it serve the latter – a point often overlooked in development thinking and planning. Societal growth is a multi-dimensional concept that essentially refers to "growth of institutions, culture, values, social capital, human relationships, respect for diversity, social inclusion and social equality" (Abdul Rahman 2015: 118). It is predicated upon "the development of society in the broadest sense of the term, in which every individual is treated as a valued asset of society. Each individual is assumed to have the ability to develop his physical, intellectual and artistic skills, to use them to contribute to the well-being of others, and to grow up as a spiritual being in the image of the Divine" (Heng 2006: 98). Societal growth should not be treated as secondary or only complementary to economic growth. Understood this way, it means that the agenda of community building – the re-embedding of economy in society – requires societal growth be made the essential foundation of economic growth and development. This is because – in the final analysis – the ultimate aim of development is for the advancement of human dignity, self worth, human values, people's well-being, and of civilisation (Abdul Rahman 2005).

Development thinkers and planners often talk of policy objectives or the intended consequences of planned change and the road

map to achieve such objectives. This is well and fine. However, we must not forget the other side of the coin – the unintended consequences which are difficult to see but must be foreseen. Past experience has shown that as an unintended consequence, societal growth can be, and has been, undermined by economic growth, the planned economic change. As an illustration, in Malaysia, we have the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1971-1990) to achieve national unity through the twin-objective of eradicating poverty irrespective of ethnicity or race, and restructuring of society to remove the identification of ethnic identity with economic functions. While the economic achievements of the NEP have been remarkable and impressive, some of the unintended consequences were far-reaching, even irreversible. What comes to mind are rural depopulation due to massive exodus of rural migrants pouring into cities, leaving behind the elderly and the very young in the villages, thus undermining the sustainability of rural communities; drastic change of values with the dominance of material values of consumption and individualism; and the persistence of uneven development with the concentration of development in highly urbanised and industrialised regions such as the Klang Valley while the outer regions remain less developed.

Such a phenomenon is not peculiar to Malaysia – it is also found in other ASEAN countries. In this regard, while fostering the Economic Pillar of the ASEAN Community and ensuring economic integration, care should be taken to ensure it does not undermine, but instead, strengthen its Societal Pillar. This is because economic growth and the ASEAN Economic Community is not an end in itself but a means to promote the development of society as a whole in ASEAN.

### **ASEAN Identity**

In the ASEAN Vision 2020 proclaimed in December 1997, it stated that, “We envision the entire Southeast Asia to be, by 2020, an ASEAN community conscious of its ties of history, aware of its cultural heritage and bound by a common regional identity.” And with that we have the ASEAN Motto of “One Vision, One Community, One Identity” which is certainly inspiring and intriguing.

A few things can be noted here. First, the awareness of ASEAN is still problematic. While ASEAN has existed for almost five decades and the ASEAN Community has been mooted for about two decades, the latest 10-nation study (ISEAS 2015) on ASEAN consciousness and attitudes shows while there is enthusiasm for, and understanding of ASEAN among the university students, but there is an uneven awareness among citizens of ASEAN member-states, with those from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar expressing more awareness than those in the older ASEAN countries such as Malaysia and Singapore. Media reports about ASEAN awareness among the ordinary peoples end to suggest also a low level of awareness. Does this mean that ASEAN is still largely an ‘imagined community’ only in the minds of its state leaders, the elites, and a disconnect exists with the ordinary people? This situation has to change. Concrete steps must be taken to ensure it catches the imagination of the different strata of peoples in the region.

Second, how do we view and manage ASEAN diversity in terms of history, language, culture and religion? Is the quest for an ASEAN identity in the form of “One Identity” as stated in the ASEAN Motto something realistic and desirable? Some observers have argued that the quest for an ASEAN identity maybe futile because in the end, “differences of culture and identity cannot be planned or erased by design” and the “regional identity building is more complicated than nation-building considering that ASEAN member-states are all multicultural and multiethnic” (Amador III 2011: 33).

While this observation maybe a little misplaced because the intention is not to erase differences by design, the point is this. Although ASEAN’s motto of “One Vision, One Community, One Identity” is an eloquent tagline, it appears rather homogenising. In reality there are different, and even competing visions of ASEAN, just as there are different conceptions of communities. When it comes to identity, the diversity in the region is even much greater, and people are proud of their different identities. ASEAN is not a supra-national state or a union like the European Union, and it should remain that way. Diversity is a civilisational asset which should be celebrated, and ASEAN should be a show case, a model, in skilfully managing diversity and harnessing it for solidarity and progress. Identity is

not monolithic. Giving space to diversity, respecting and allowing the cultural differences to flourish is the ASEAN way and ASEAN identity.

### **Towards A People's ASEAN**

It is in this regard that I would like to put forth the idea of a People's ASEAN as the embodiment of the ASEAN Community. This is not a matter of semantics, but one of substance, of principle, of outlook. ASEAN has made important strides in reaching out beyond the state-centred institution it used to be. It has adopted in its documents concepts such as "a people-centred and people-oriented ASEAN". However, a People's ASEAN is more than a community that is "people-centred or people-oriented." To use the age-old adage, it should be a community "of the people, by the people, and for the people." In other words, it starts with the people's interest at heart, consultative and participatory in its approaches, and it contributes towards the people's well-being. It is inclusive in terms of means as well as an end. It is a principle and certainly an outlook of life.

Towards this end, a few measures can be undertaken. First, strengthening and broadening the social architecture. Besides the official state and business networks as part of the regional architecture for the ASEAN Community, the social architecture is very crucial, which needs to be strengthened, broadened, and made more inclusive. One of the most active and vocal in this social architecture are civil society organisations (CSOs) and their ASEAN Civil Society Conference and ASEAN People's Forum. In this regard, the question raised by some civil society organisations (CSOs) as to whether "the ASEAN door is ajar", or "is it closed to civil society organisations?" (Collin 2008) is important so that the feeling of exclusion is eliminated. Also the point made by the ASEAN Civil Society Conference and ASEAN People's Forum in Timor Leste in 2016 to "reclaim our region and expand peoples' solidarity towards a just, responsive and inclusive ASEAN community, which is represented by all its peoples, including the marginalised and oppressed" (ACSCS/ APF 2016) is a pertinent question to address.

Second, bridging the gap between top down and bottom up approaches. The existing top-down state-centred elitist vision and imagination needs to converge and draw strength from the vision, wisdom and imagination from below. A People's ASEAN will ensure the sustainability of the community for it nurtures a sense of ownership and of sharing a common future. This is a crucial lesson from the Brexit episode – the exit of Britain from the European Union. For this to happen, a change of mind set is necessary both among the elite and among the people.

Third, relevant social institutions in society need to be identified and mobilised. The universities in ASEAN as well as the ASEAN media are key players in building and extending the social architecture.

Fourth, very importantly, the home, the family as well as schools are essential parts of this social architecture to nurture the young minds in building our tomorrow today. In this regard, I share the sentiments of the current Chairperson of ASEAN Secretariat Women's Wing, Rajaguru-Pushpanathan (2016), that "if the women and children are actively engaged in building One ASEAN: one home! The ASEAN consciousness!" then the social architecture has a solid foundation.

To conclude, let me quote from the ASEAN Anthem which states beautifully that "we dare to dream, we care to share for it's the way of ASEAN." The realization of the substance of the ASEAN anthem from words to deeds, from concept to reality, from the abstract to the concrete, is absolutely essential to strengthen the credibility and longevity of the ASEAN Community along the lines of a People's ASEAN. Thank you.

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