



A Human Agenda For ASEAN

by Jose T. Almonte

Greater effort is needed to bridge the gap between governments and civil society in ASEAN. There is a need among the people of ASEAN to create an authentic Southeast Asian community. Communities, after all, are about people-and the ties that hold these human groupings together are neither faceless institutions nor impersonal agreements but mutual commitments freely given. Communities are about caring and sharing; about people 'owning,' in common, a collective venture. Communities are also about belonging, about being attached to a place and a way of life. Communities are about sharing interests with like-minded people.

Of necessity, ASEAN so far has dealt almost exclusively with regional unification, regional security, and regional development. ASEAN statesmen have focused on creating a region-wide market; strengthening regional competitiveness; and reaching out to other regional blocks and centers of international power. Unavoidably, the 10 ASEAN states, although now formally united, still have a weak sense of community. Despite their ties of blood, culture, and history, our peoples are still set apart by their colonial experience, their wide variety of political systems, their patterns of trade and alliances, and their low economic complementarities.

Even now, a full generation since ASEAN's founding, our peoples feel no personal intimacy, no moral commitment, no historical continuity, with each other. Even the modern map of our region was drawn by the imperial powers, which left us a legacy of irredentism and separatism. We need to transform this immense diversity from a source of weakness to a source of strength.

In the beginning, Southeast Asian regionalism of necessity organized itself around our nation-states, and measured its progress by its success in ensuring their collective security. But now the survival of Southeast Asian states is no longer at risk; neither is there any doubt about their capacity to cooperate for collective security. So ASEAN must move on; it ASEAN must broaden and deepen its process of community-building. ASEAN must take up a "human agenda."

A 'Human Agenda' For ASEAN

By this we mean that ASEAN must now relate itself - all it does and all it stands for - to the daily lives of ordinary Southeast Asians. And ASEAN must do this because, if we are to build a true community, it must be a community not only of the regional elite but of everyday Southeast Asians as well.

In other words, ASEAN must enable ordinary Southeast Asians to feel they too 'own' the Southeast Asian community. For the days are long gone when rulers decided on things over the heads of their peoples. Thanks to the revolution in information, communication, and transportation technologies, people everywhere have become socially and physically mobile. Even now, we are seeing throughout Southeast Asia unprecedented political activism by the volatile element in civil society, the new middle-class.

Everywhere in the region, this new class of professionals, small entrepreneurs, and knowledge workers is demanding respect for its status and for political participation. In Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, and in my own country, the Philippines, middle-class people are crying out against corruption in office, irresponsibility in the legislature, and lack of transparency and accountability in the whole of government. Our middle classes are also reaching out to each other. They are being inspired by each other's achievements and are learning from each other's experiences. And they are forcing governments to respond to their demands, on pain of being turned out of office either by their vote or by people power.

A Regional Association In Search Of People

If ASEAN is to remain relevant, it too must start responding to these popular demands. For, if the Southeast Asian peoples are in search of an association, ASEAN is an association in search of people; ASEAN's own need for a true regional community is getting more and more acute. ASEAN needs popular support from Southeast Asian civil society, because future challenges to ASEAN are likely to be of the type that will affect the region as a whole, rather than only individual states within it.

For instance, a regional economy must now be organized. Regional security must be enhanced against encroachments on our maritime heartland. Common policies against cross-border crime - drug-trafficking, terrorism, piracy, pornography, prostitution - and pollution of the environment must be decided on. These challenges must be met collectively and regionally. They cannot be met effectively by neighbor-states operating in isolation. ASEAN has no alternative to accelerating and deepening regional cooperation across the board. To get this done, ASEAN must reach out beyond the regional political and economic elite to non-government associations, people's organizations, and professional and civic groupings throughout the region. In a word, ASEAN must now reach out to Southeast Asia's civil society.

How Do We Realize This Vision?

To be fair, the ASEAN leaders have detailed their vision, to be achieved over the next 20 years, of ASEAN as "a concert of Southeast Asian nations: outward-looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in

dynamic development, and in a community of caring societies." "Caring" is the operative word, and it signifies a host of civic qualities. Caring means empathy, compassion, and the commitment to offer help and comfort to all.

How do we begin to realize this vision of ASEAN as a community of caring societies? Our first priority must be to build on our ties of history, cultural heritage, and regional identity, on the idea of "unity in diversity" implicit in our political groupings. We must rediscover the cultural values we share, which were formed long before the dawn of history, by our rice paddies and monsoon environment.

Southeast Asia's richest source of solidarity is the family. We must guard our traditional family values against disruptive foreign influences. We must also expand people-to-people contacts throughout the region. But, we should not imagine we can build an ASEAN community according to an overall design. As Jean Monnet did, in building the European Union, we should begin at the beginning, through cooperation on tangible projects of common advantage, and of self-evident utility. And the proper first step is for every member-state to put its own house in order, to organize transparency and accountability in its governance, and to level the playing field of enterprise.

The Moral Purpose Of The Southeast Asian Community

The true community should have a moral purpose. For ASEAN, the primary purpose of development should be to wipe out poverty. The Southeast Asian community we envision should put people at the center of development. It should also have a thought for the non-material aspects of prosperity. Economic growth should not merely enrich the already well-off: it should lift up the common life. Economic growth, equitably shared, could itself become a binder of community, just as the cross-border "Growth Triangle" (Batam Island, Singapore, and Johore Bahru) is accustoming the peoples of this area of ASEAN to living, working, and doing business with one another.

Regional peace should be defined not merely as the absence of war but as the promotion of the well-being of ordinary people. In extirpating mass poverty, Southeast Asia has had a good record. But all our countries could do a great deal more to care for those social groups development has left behind, to restore incomes lost by our middle classes to the financial crisis of 1997-98, and to prevent future crises from blighting the prospects of people who subsist on the margins of the regional economy.

Good governance is crucial. We now know poverty is not inevitable. People are poor not from God's will but from a failure of governance. As Peter Drucker says, "There are no 'underdeveloped' countries any more. There are only mis-managed countries." And Amartya Sen's study of the famines in India, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, and the Saharan states led him to believe that mass-starvation can occur even when there is enough food, if unaccountable rulers are indifferent to their people's distress. The Nobel laureate concluded that, in all these famines, "it was the lack of democracy, not the lack of food, that left millions dead." This is a lesson we in ASEAN should take to heart.

The Concept Of Human Security

Beyond assuring our peoples the material decencies of life, ASEAN must establish social justice and individual dignity within every Southeast Asian society, as the internal requisite of the caring societies our leaders envision. ASEAN should work to create more equal and more tolerant societies in Southeast Asia. It should acknowledge the legitimate concerns of ordinary people who seek security in their daily lives against the threat of disease, hunger, joblessness, crime, social conflict, political repression, and environmental degradation. In fact, there is a new concept of national security which encompasses all these concerns and which could help ASEAN realize its vision of caring societies.

This new concept of "human security" improves on the idea of comprehensive national security, and reorients it to promote the well-being of citizens, and the political and economic rights that enable ordinary people to live with self-respect and dignity. The concept of human security acknowledges the superior wisdom that comes from free choice. In Southeast Asia, the concept of human security can form part of the ideological framework for realizing our leaders' vision of ASEAN as a community of caring societies.

"Regionism" As Our Shared Goal

Lastly, ASEAN must take up the concept of "regionism" as its shared goal. Regionism means all of us in Southeast Asia adopting as our own the interests of the region as a whole. We must cast away the traditional relationships under which states recognized no motive higher than their own national interest. We must all agree there is a higher purpose than the immediate national interest which unification will serve. We must all accept that the whole is more than the sum of its parts.

Community-building is, in practice, a task more suited to civil society than to governments, because a sense of community cannot be enforced by fiat nor commanded by force. Governments have never been good at social and community tasks, although governments everywhere have often tried to undertake them. Community-building belongs properly to the dynamic side of citizenship, to public participation in voluntary associations, the mass media, professional associations, trade unions, and similar groupings. The leaders of Southeast Asian civil society have a crucial task before them - to see to it that ASEAN turns out as its founding fathers dreamt, a community where governments do what is right for their people, and people do what is right for each other.

Even the synergy of regionism may not suffice to make ASEAN an economic or military superpower. But its transformation into a community of caring societies should make it a moral power of the first rank, able to exert a benign influence on the whole of the global community.

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