

ASEANFocus

A BIMONTHLY PUBLICATION PROVIDING CONCISE ANALYSES AND PERSPECTIVES ON ASEAN MATTERS

Reviewing the 32nd
ASEAN Summit

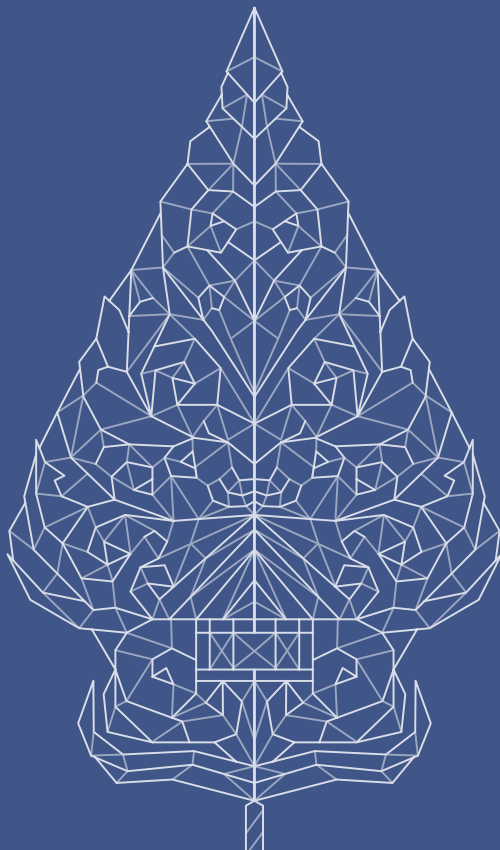
ASEAN-Australia
Relations

Cruising ASEAN
Waters

Myanmar's Ethnic
Mosaic After the
Rohingya Exodus

ASEAN's Role on
the Rakhine Issue

ASEAN-Australia Relations
The Rakhine Issue
Puppetry Arts



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ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (formerly Institute of Southeast Asian Studies) is an autonomous organisation established in 1968. It is a regional centre dedicated to the study of socio-political, security, and economic trends and developments in Southeast Asia and its wider geostrategic and economic environment. The Institute's research programmes are grouped under Regional Economic Studies (RES), Regional Social and Cultural Studies (RSCS) and Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS). The Institute is also home to the ASEAN Studies Centre (ASC), the Nalanda-Sriwijaya Centre (NSC) and the Singapore APEC Study Centre.

Editorial Notes

International politics never stands still. It brings you from one momentous event to another tectonic development. That is the region's experience in the past two months. US President Donald Trump and the leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) Kim Jong-un have given hope of an unlikely rapprochement with their agreement to hold a historic summit in May – a pipe dream just a couple of months ago. In the economic arena, the signing of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) on March 8 was a commendable effort among the remaining TPP members to defend the multilateral trading system and press on with free and open trade. Protectionism however is surging among the world's two largest economies with the US and China apparently on the cusp of a trade war.

Meanwhile, March and April are busy months for ASEAN with the highlights being the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit on 17-18 March in Sydney and the 32nd ASEAN Summit on 27-28 April in Singapore. Dr. Tang Siew Mun reviews the key outcomes of the 32nd ASEAN Summit while Ms. Hoang Thi Ha and Dr. Termsak Chalermpanupap share their take-aways from the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit. We are especially honoured to feature an article by Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Julie Bishop on ASEAN's position in Australia's Indo-Pacific outlook and the importance of enhanced ASEAN-Australia strategic partnership amidst growing power contestations in the region. *ASEAN in Figures* provides a snapshot of ASEAN-Australia relations through telling numbers.

In this issue, we explore the landscape of cruise tourism in ASEAN. While many travelers may have fond memories of setting sail on cruises, much is not known about the intricacies of the cruise tourism industry. Ms. Christina Siaw, CEO of Singapore Cruise Centre, provides her perspective on the potentials of cruise tourism in ASEAN and the need to develop port infrastructure and regional collaboration to promote this industry.

The exodus of 700,000 Rohingyas across Myanmar's border to Bangladesh since September 2017 and their humanitarian catastrophe recast the world's attention to the long-standing issue of the Rohingya's status in Myanmar and inter-communal conflicts in Rakhine State. In this issue, we present a range of perspectives from different ends of the spectrum and in between on this complex issue. While curating the articles for this section, we always reminded ourselves of the need for objectivity and an open mind to appreciate different sides of the story as viewed from different angles and by different stakeholders of many persuasions, including academics, media entities, and

both Rakhine and Rohingya communities (the use of the term "Rohingya" refers to the self-identification by many Muslims in Rakhine State as such.) Our purpose is to bridge the gap in understanding the issue – not to point finger at who is more wrong or who is more right.

Dr. Robert Taylor brings us back to the long history of ethnic politics and tensions in Myanmar, the seeds of which were sown during its colonial days as a province of British India. Dr. Jacques Leider delves into the 'living history' of the name 'Rohingya' and its link to the formation of a collective Muslim identity in Rakhine. Mr. Nyunt Maung Shein, Chairman of the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS), stresses the urgent need to bridge the gaping trust deficit on the situation in Rakhine. Meanwhile, Dr. Nicholas Farrelly calls for a re-think of the national mindset on ethnicity in the country.

This section also features the views and experiences as shared by some prominent Rakhine people and displaced Rohingyas – the two communities at stake whose voices must be heard in the search for a comprehensive and durable solution to the problem. Additionally, media access and factual media reporting are critical amidst so much of sensationalism and polarisation on this issue. We therefore reached out to three major news outlets in Myanmar – *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, *Frontier Myanmar* and *The Voice* – to hear their views and experiences in reporting from the crisis frontline.

For *Insider Views*, we interview Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, Chairman of the Advisory Board for the Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State, on how the Board can help bridge the gap in perception among various stakeholders and suggest forward-looking measures to improve the situation on the ground. From the vantage point of ASEAN, Ms. Moe Thuzar and Ms. Hoang Thi Ha look at how the grouping can play a constructive and effective role in this matter.

In *Sights and Sounds*, Ms. Cheryl Teh brings you into the world of puppetry arts, a well-loved art form across Southeast Asia, and Ms. Nur Aziemah introduces you to Koh Rong, an island paradise just off the shores of Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

On a last note, we would like to thank Mr. Jason Salim, former Assistant Production Editor of ASEANFocus, for his valuable contributions and stellar work which have helped the publication grow from strength to strength. We wish him all the best in his future endeavours. 🙏

Towards a Resilient and Innovative ASEAN

Tang Siew Mun reviews the key outcomes of the 32nd ASEAN Summit.

Singapore hosted the 32nd ASEAN Summit from 27-28 April 2018 – one of the two most important events on the ASEAN calendar. The biannual gathering of ASEAN Leaders is the regional organisation’s highest decision-making body. Its importance stems from its mandate in setting the ASEAN agenda and direction for the year and beyond, as reflected in three key deliverables: ASEAN Leaders’ Vision for A Resilient and Innovative ASEAN, the ASEAN Smart Cities Network, and the ASEAN Leaders’ Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation.

The Vision for A Resilient and Innovative ASEAN is a frank and realistic assessment of the immediate- and medium-term opportunities and challenges facing ASEAN as it embraces geopolitical, economic, societal and technological tectonic shifts. Its ten Key Principles include (a) unity and centrality, (b) rules-based order, (c) peace and security, (d) cooperation against terrorism and non-traditional threats (e) economic integration and openness, (f) embrace technology, (g) investment in youth and elderly, (h) strengthening ASEAN identity, (i) sustainable and inclusive development, and (j) respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is a succinct reflection of ASEAN’s aspirations and goals in the outside, and its insecurities and concerns in the inside.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in his remarks at the Summit’s Opening Ceremony, shared that these Key Principles “underpin our collective vision [...] to build a Resilient and Innovative ASEAN for the future, and identify concrete initiatives that ASEAN will undertake to realise this vision.” These specific targets will ensure that ASEAN will remain relevant to its 640 million stakeholders. It is noteworthy that six out of the ten Key Principles fall under the political-security rubric, an indication of the importance of having a strong and stable political-security foundation to support the region’s economic growth and social cohesiveness. More importantly, putting political discussions on the front burner of the regional discourse demonstrates ASEAN’s growing comfort and maturity in handling difficult and sensitive topics. For example, the Leaders’ Statement on Cybersecurity Cooperation reaffirms ASEAN’s openness towards intra-regional security cooperation while earnestly reaching out to its Dialogue Partners to create a secure and resilient cyber ecosystem in the region.

The third major outcome is the establishment of the ASEAN Smart Cities Network (ASCN), with 26 ASEAN cities signing up as pilot “ASCN cities.” The network aims to



harness technologies in addressing rapid urbanisation across the region. Close to half of ASEAN's population currently reside in the urban areas. Cities will be under tremendous pressure to provide basic services such as affordable housing, health service, transport, education and recreation spaces as the urbanisation trend accelerates in the coming decades. Apart from the emphasis on "smart solutions," the novelty of the ASCN lies in its attempt to open up new "fronts" of regional cooperation. The network's membership, which spans beyond the capital cities with the participation of "non-capital" cities, plugs the provincial authorities and entities directly into the ASEAN framework.

The impact of including the provincial cities into the ASCN would be significant, especially in connecting ASEAN with a wider pool of its constituents to narrow the development gap and increasing the sense of ownership in ASEAN. In addition, the proposed twinning programme which pairs up an ASEAN city with a Dialogue Partner could potentially provide the avenue for the Dialogue Partners to broaden their partnership with ASEAN beyond the "government-to-government" framework. These innovations may well inject new dynamism into how ASEAN handles its internal and external relations.

The Summit was missing two of its stalwarts with the absence of Malaysian caretaker Prime Minister Najib Razak and Myanmar State Councillor Aung San Suu Kyi. In true ASEAN spirit, camaraderie and discussion were as warm as they were robust. Although media reports in the run-up to the Summit indicated that the Myanmar leadership were uncomfortable with the external pressure exerted on Nay Pyi Taw on the Rakhine issue, Myanmar, to its great credit, did not shy away from briefing the ASEAN Leaders on the matter. While the section on the Rakhine issue in the Chairman's Statement may not assuage critics of the Myanmar government's handling of the crisis, it does demonstrate that the matter was not swept under the ASEAN carpet.

In the same vein, ASEAN did not duck on the "hot topic" of the South China Sea. Addressing a question from the press pool, Prime Minister Lee captured the essence of the ASEAN approach: "The language on the South China Sea commands the consensus of the ASEAN countries. It is the same language which we have used before so there is nothing very earth-shaking about it. But it is significant that the language stands and has not been modified." ASEAN has maintained a delicate balance between affirming the rule of law and emphasising the importance of non-militarisation with the forward momentum of the COC negotiations and other confidence building measures.

Traditionally, the first Summit of the year is mainly focused on "internal" or "housekeeping" matters, but the swirling geopolitical and geo-economic winds compelled ASEAN to cast its eye towards regional and international developments. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers meeting at the side-lines of the Summit issued a statement on the developments in the Korean Peninsula, welcoming the Inter-Korean Summit and the proposed meeting between US President Donald Trump and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's

leader Kim Jong Un. Press reports have narrowed down the venue for the proposed meeting to two locations, Ulan Bator (Mongolia) and Singapore. The region may well play an important role in lending its support toward a peaceful and nuclear-free Korean Peninsula and the US-DPRK rapprochement if the latter choice is confirmed.

ASEAN's reputation as a neutral and trusted interlocutor is one that is hard earned and well-deserved. Notwithstanding ASEAN's strong stance against nuclear proliferation, it has maintained an open line of communication with the DPRK through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), which is the only regional body Pyongyang is a member of. Singapore's good offices were also called upon in 2015 in the historic meeting between China's President Xi Jinping and Taiwan's President Ma Ying-jeou.

Another notable take-away from the Summit is ASEAN's relative silence on the Indo-Pacific concept, which was referenced in the Chairman's Statement in the following tone: "We looked forward to further discussion on recent initiatives, including the Indo-Pacific concept." Given the lack of clarity on the concept, it was not surprising that it did not surface as one of the major talking points. However, there may be more than meets the eye as Indonesia's reported strong interest and advocacy for its version of the concept may add a new dimension to on-going and future discussions.

Other initiatives towards a resilient and innovative ASEAN include the establishment of the ASEAN Law Academy (ALA) and the renewal of the Singapore-ASEAN Youth Fund (SAYF). The ALA run by the Centre for International Law at National University of Singapore will engage ASEAN policy-makers and provide capacity-building to support the rule of law in the region. Singapore's contribution of US\$5 million to the SAYF to support "ground-up initiatives by ASEAN youths" will further enhance regional youth links. These are modest but very much welcomed steps towards the creation of a people-oriented, people-centred community.

On a lighter note, the 32nd ASEAN Summit confirms the replacement of the "ASEAN handshake" with the "ASEAN wave" this year. The ASEAN handshake with leaders and ministers crossing their hands and linking up with their peers as a sign of unity and friendship was last seen at the 31st ASEAN Summit and Related Summits in Manila. The handshake was "replaced" by the wave at the ASEAN-India Commemorative Summit in January 2018, an innovation that was continued at the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in March 2018 and the recently concluded Summit. 🌊

Dr. Tang Siew Mun is Head, ASEAN Studies Centre at ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

ASEAN: The Nexus of the Indo-Pacific



The Hon. Julie Bishop reflects on regional order and outlines the way forward to strengthen the ASEAN-Australia partnership.

ASEAN is pivotal to any debate about the future of the Indo-Pacific. Geographically, diplomatically and strategically, ASEAN sits at the heart of this important region. It is the collective voice of Southeast Asia; it has helped develop significant parts of our rules-based order; and it convenes the most important diplomatic fora, such as the East Asia Summit, at which the major powers of the Indo-Pacific meet.

The Indo-Pacific is the perspective through which Australia is shaping its approach to the region. It is not only a geographic area. Rather, the term reflects the strategic and economic reality that the most important part of the world for Australia is embraced by the Indian and Pacific Oceans to the west and east, with Asia to our north. It also reflects the reality that India is an increasingly significant feature of our outlook, which flows naturally from India's status as a major player in our region and one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

Strengthening, promoting and defending the international rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific is Australia's highest priority. Australia and ASEAN have been clear beneficiaries of this order, within which small and medium-sized countries can prosecute their interests freely, unconstrained by any exercise of coercive power. The rules-based order seeks to regulate rivalries and behaviour, and ensure countries compete fairly and in a way that does not threaten others or destabilise the region.

Our region is undergoing fundamental change, as geopolitical and geo-economics dynamics shift and major powers grapple for influence. We must strengthen and defend the existing order so that our region continues to rise economically and peacefully.

We all need to consider how we preserve our shared interest in a secure and prosperous Indo-Pacific. ASEAN is uniquely placed in this challenge. It lies at the nexus of the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN-led regional architecture provide forums for open and transparent discussions of the region's key strategic challenges in which all participants – big and small – can contribute on an equal basis.

ASEAN has bolstered its prosperity by driving economic integration in Southeast Asia – in the process fostering peace by building habits of dialogue and collaboration. The open

economic architecture that ASEAN and its partners have developed has allowed ASEAN and Australian economic engagement to flourish. Taken as a group, ASEAN is Australia's third largest trading partner. Two-way trade amounted to more than AUS\$100 billion in 2016-2017.

ASEAN's most advanced economies have prospered through their openness. Singapore, one of the most open economies globally, has transformed itself, as Lee Kuan Yew said, from Third World Nation to First. We should heed the benefits of economic openness and reflect on the pitfalls of protectionism.

Australia is committed to an open and inclusive regional architecture, with ASEAN at its center. We are proud to have been ASEAN's first Dialogue Partner in 1974. Our relationship continues to gather strength, including through the conclusion of a free trade agreement (FTA) between Australia, New Zealand and ASEAN in 2010, regarded as ASEAN's highest quality FTA. In 2013, we accredited a resident Ambassador to ASEAN in Jakarta. The following year, we elevated our relationship to a Strategic Partnership. In 2015, we announced the biennial ASEAN-Australia Summit, which was then held for the first time in the Lao capital of Vientiane in 2016.

In March 2018, Australia and ASEAN took our relationship to new heights when Prime Minister Turnbull hosted the region's leaders in Sydney for the historic and unprecedented ASEAN-Australia Special Summit.

The leaders' joint statement from the Summit – the Sydney Declaration – sets out a clear vision for the ASEAN-Australia partnership and our shared commitment to intensify our cooperation. It is in Australia's national interest to be a leading security, economic and development partner for Southeast Asia. To do this, we will:

- Focus our regional engagement on supporting a prosperous, outwardly-focused, stable and resilient Southeast Asia;
- Enhance cooperation on transnational challenges like terrorism, crime and human trafficking, for example through the ASEAN-Australia Counter-Trafficking initiative which will continue our longstanding support of the region's agenda to end human trafficking;
- Boost our defence engagement bilaterally and through



ASEAN Secretariat

ASEAN Secretary-General Dato Lim Jock Hoi with Australian Foreign Minister The Hon. Julie Bishop at the signing of the MOU on Cooperation to Counter International Terrorism

ASEAN-led mechanisms; for example the ASEAN-Australia Postgraduate Defence Scholarships will bring together emerging defence and security leaders from ASEAN countries and Australia, fostering future cooperation on regional security challenges;

- Deepen trade and investment links, including through concluding a high-quality Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership FTA and building on our FTAs with Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and ASEAN; and by developing and adopting international standards that promote digital trade and support inclusive economic growth in the region under the ASEAN-Australia Digital Standards initiative;
- Enhance regional economic integration through investment in infrastructure and cooperation on smart cities. The ASEAN-Australia Infrastructure Cooperation project, for example, aims to establish a rolling priority pipeline of potential ASEAN regional infrastructure projects and identify sources of funding; and
- Partner with Southeast Asian countries on development programs that promote economic reform and inclusive growth, reduce poverty and address inequality.

Australia is a steadfast supporter of ASEAN's leadership and central role in the Indo-Pacific, including its regional architecture. We strongly support the vision of ASEAN leadership to entrench the East Asia Summit as the region's key forum for addressing strategic challenges. We have sponsored statements at successive East Asia Summits that focus on the need to step up efforts to address security threats such as terrorism financing and nuclear proliferation. At the recent Special Summit, I co-signed the Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation to Counter International Terrorism, a historic agreement which strengthens ASEAN-

Australia cooperation to combat terrorism, counter terrorism financing and counter violent extremism.

Our people are naturally interwoven – nearly one million Australian residents claim ASEAN ancestry, two-way tourist flows are high, and we have flourishing education links. Australia welcomed almost 100,000 students from ASEAN countries in 2016, nearly 18% of our total international student number. Australians are also increasingly studying in ASEAN countries, including through the New Colombo Plan, with 43% of total New Colombo Plan recipients undertaking study and work placements in ASEAN.

While welcoming these positive developments, the increasingly competitive and contested region we inhabit means Australia and ASEAN need to step up our collective defence of the principles that have made the Indo-Pacific secure and prosperous.

A strong and confident ASEAN that speaks with one voice is a powerful force for good in the Indo-Pacific. Australia is committed to working with ASEAN to shape a region that is open, prosperous and inclusive and where the rights of all states are respected. These are essential values to shape the type of Indo-Pacific region we aspire to. 🇺🇸

The Hon. Julie Bishop is the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Australia.

Cruising ASEAN Waters

Christina Siaw regards port infrastructure and regional collaboration as keys to unlock the potential of ASEAN cruise industry.

Southeast Asia's cruise industry is still in a nascent stage but largely set for a take-off. ASEAN member states have benefited from the growth of source markets like China and India with the rise of a large middle class with higher disposable income. The region itself has much to offer tourists. Southeast Asia has over 25,000 islands, most of which have yet to be developed for cruise tourism. Therein lies the exciting potential for cruise tourism in this region.

Southeast Asia also offers excellent maritime scenery, hundreds of sightseeing spots and numerous cultural attractions. The sunny weather and calm waters all year round make it an excellent destination for ships based in China, Korea and Japan to head south during winter, as these areas are popular with tourists and accessible by cruise ships.

While cruise tourism in the region has been growing at an impressive rate, Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular have yet to fully tap their potential as a cruise destination and source market. Statistics from the Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), the world's largest cruise industry trade association, revealed that penetration of cruise as a percentage of the total population in Southeast Asia remains extremely low at less than 0.2%, with Singapore being the exception to the norm. This is compared with more than 4% in Australia, over 3% in the United States, and over 2% in Europe.

One can reasonably expect that as Asia grows in affluence, its burgeoning middle class will spend more on travel and cruise tourism's share of the pie will grow. Statistics from the *Asia Cruise Trends 2017* report, commissioned by the CLIA, show that 35 cruise brands deploying 66 ships were active in Asia last year and that cruise capacity has increased across all metrics. The number of ships deployed has grown 53 percent since 2013 and the number of cruises within and through Asia increased at the compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 25%. From 2013 to 2017, passenger capacity almost tripled from 1.51 million passengers in 2013 to 4.24 million in 2017. China is the main driver of growth in the region, growing at an impressive 76% CAGR since 2012. In fact, one in two cruise passengers in Asia are from China.

In terms of source markets, Southeast Asia contributes close to 20% of overall growth and within Southeast Asia, Indonesia is expected to experience the biggest jump in cruise passenger volumes, with a 303.4% increase from 2012 to 238,000 in 2020, according to data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

“Beyond the important economic underpinnings of cruise tourism, this sector supports ASEAN's ongoing community-building efforts by enhancing Southeast Asians' understanding and appreciation of each other's cultures and histories.”

(OECD). Malaysia is projected to double passenger volumes by 2020 and Singapore, the departure port for most cruises in the region, is forecast to record a 98.9% increase in volumes to 181,000 by 2020.

While Singapore will continue to be the starting point for larger cruise ships' itineraries, ports like Bangkok in Thailand, Bali in Indonesia, and Kota Kinabalu and Penang in Malaysia, are expected to grow and serve as turnarounds ports for the region. Other popular ports include Halong Bay in Vietnam, Phuket in Thailand and Langkawi in Malaysia.

Another trend that augurs well for cruise tourism in Southeast Asia is the increasing number of international cruise liners that have made their way to the region. These cruise lines have shifted their focus beyond their traditional Mediterranean and Caribbean markets and expanded their offerings. They have also started tapping the high-end market with luxury and themed products and services, offering travellers unique experiences and creating greater buzz in the process.

To ride on this growth, Southeast Asian nations have joined forces to lift the profile of the region as a cruising destination and broaden the tourism market. In 2016, ASEAN member states unveiled the inaugural Cruise Southeast Asia brand, proposed by Singapore in its role as the ASEAN lead coordinator for cruise development.

More recently, Singapore has taken the lead to endorse the signing of a joint ASEAN Declaration on Cruise Tourism early this year, marking another milestone in ASEAN's ongoing efforts to transform Southeast Asia into a vibrant cruising destination. Under the Declaration, ASEAN member states will collaborate further to develop cruise tourism in the region by improving the clarity of policies and regulations, efficiency in administration processes, expanding connectivity between different ports and refining business practices to be fairer and more responsible.

In March 2018, the Singapore Tourism Board and the CLIA announced a three-year partnership aimed at boosting the increasingly vibrant cruising industry in ASEAN. The organisations will collaborate on travel agent training in priority cruise markets including Malaysia, Indonesia and India, destination marketing efforts, regional port development, and exchange of technical and regulatory best practices.

These partnerships are encouraging for the industry and go to show that cruise development in ASEAN requires a concerted effort. Beyond the important economic underpinnings of cruise tourism, this sector supports ASEAN’s ongoing community-building efforts by enhancing Southeast Asians’ understanding and appreciation of each other’s cultures and histories. Its vast potential in marketing ASEAN as a single tourism destination is also a boon to the ASEAN Community.

While the future is bright, the industry still has some way to go. A hurdle to growth is the lack of consumer knowledge and confidence in experiences offered. The industry needs to work with travel agents and cruise lines to develop innovative products catered to Asian consumers and devise novel ways to build consumer confidence in the diversity of products

and experiences available. Some offerings tailored to Asian guests include activities for multi-generational families, high-end shopping and adapted menus with regional cuisine.

More importantly, the region faces obstacles that are structural in nature and require resources, time and political will to overcome. For instance, many of the cruise port infrastructure remain undeveloped and access to the islands is not physically and economically feasible. Unlike air travel destinations, cruise destinations cannot survive as stand-alones but require a cluster of destinations to form an itinerary. It is hence imperative for all stakeholders to work together to raise the region’s offering as a whole.

To meet growing demand for cruising in the region, the industry trend is increasingly towards the deployment of large cruise ships carrying 3,500 passengers or more. As bigger ships come into the region, port infrastructure will need to be upgraded urgently to accommodate them. Currently, the lack of proper port infrastructure limits where larger ships can sail to, which means smaller but interesting destinations may be excluded from some itineraries. 🚢

Ms. Christina Siaw is Chief Executive Officer of Singapore Cruise Centre.



Old Bonds, New Common Interests

Hoang Thi Ha and Termsak Chalermpanupap give their take on the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit.

The ASEAN-Australia Special Summit on 17-18 March in Sydney was an important milestone in ASEAN-Australia dialogue partnership which has grown significantly over the past few years. Both sides have elevated their relations to strategic partnership since 2014 and institutionalised their biennial summit, the first one being held in 2016 in Vientiane.

The Summit was held at a critical juncture as ASEAN and Australia find themselves in an increasingly contested region. A re-emerging China is asserting itself as a dominant power in the region. The US, Japan, India and Australia are counteracting with the revitalisation of their quadrilateral partnership (Quad) and the Indo-Pacific concept that links the Indian Ocean with the Western Pacific, further diluting the China-centric East Asian regionalism. However, Australia's economic dependence on China requires Canberra to define a more nuanced and balanced approach. Hence, the release of Australia's Foreign Policy White Paper in December 2017, in which Canberra seeks to defend the open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific through multi-vectored engagement with the major powers and other regional states as well as trilateral, plurilateral and multilateral mechanisms.

The White Paper accorded high importance to Southeast Asia and ASEAN-led mechanisms. Both ASEAN and Australia have shared interests and are natural partners

in defending an inclusive and rules-based regional order to protect all nations, big or small. As remarked by Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong during the Special Summit, Australia "has been an active and steadfast contributor [...] to the open and inclusive regional security and economic architecture." On his part, Australian Prime Minister Turnbull saw the Special Summit as an opportunity to reiterate "Australia's steadfast commitment to ASEAN and ASEAN centrality." The Sydney Declaration reaffirmed the commitment to "ASEAN's central role in the evolving rules-based regional architecture [...] through ASEAN-led mechanisms."

As seen through various initiatives at the Summit, Australia has invested significantly in strengthening ASEAN-Australia strategic partnership. There were 15 clusters of initiatives ranging from counter-terrorism, maritime security, cyber-security and trafficking in persons to smart cities, e-commerce and infrastructure development. Most initiatives are to be implemented with Australia's funding and involvement of its government agencies.

As a top common security concern, counter-terrorism featured high on the Summit's agenda with the convening of a counter-terrorism conference and the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on cooperation in this respect. Under the MoU, Australia will extend technical assistance and capacity-building to ASEAN member states



“ASEAN and Australia have common interests in defending the liberal multilateral trading system against the surging headwinds of protectionism and the unfolding “trade war” between the US and China.”

on counter-terrorism legislation, terrorism financing, and new technologies to detect and disrupt terrorist activities.

The Special Summit however was clouded by some controversies over the clash of democracy and human rights values between Canberra and some ASEAN member states. Prior to the Special Summit, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen threatened not to attend while Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte announced that his Foreign Secretary would attend on his behalf due to alleged concerns over protests in Australia to his human rights record. Another source of potential tensions is the situation in Myanmar’s Rakhine State which saw around 700,000 Rohingyas flee to Bangladesh since September 2017.

As it turned out, the Sydney Declaration did not mention the above sensitive issues. Instead, it maintained some modicum of consensus at the abstract level over the common values of “peace, harmony, intercultural understanding, the rule of law, good governance, respect, trust, tolerance, inclusiveness, moderation, social responsibility and diversity.” Both ASEAN member states and Australia have made efforts to put bilateral problems on the back burner and prioritise the larger good of their dialogue relations. Instead of grandstanding in an ASEAN setting, Prime Minister Turnbull pursued “frank engagement” with Cambodian and Myanmar leaders during his bilateral talks. Despite being under considerable domestic pressure, the Australian leader has apparently learned how to dance with ASEAN leaders in the ASEAN Way – through quiet diplomacy and constructive engagement.

The Special Summit also attracted media attention over Indonesian President Joko Widodo’s positive response regarding Australia’s membership in ASEAN in a Fairfax Media interview on 15 March. He might just have been diplomatic in answering a highly hypothetical question since Australia is clearly not in “the recognised geographic region of Southeast Asia” – a criterion for membership in the ASEAN Charter. Turnbull was ambivalent in response to an inquiry on this matter, neither rejecting nor actively pushing it forward. Though advocacy for admission into ASEAN has been around for decades, this view does not represent the mainstream Australian strategic thinking, and there has been no decided shift within Australia towards seeking ASEAN membership.

Nevertheless, the fact that this issue remains alive reflects Australia’s long-standing interest to deepen engagement with Southeast Asia and ASEAN, which dates back to 1974 when Australia became ASEAN’s first Dialogue Partner. Turnbull meant that much in his post-Summit conference on 18 March: “The countries of ASEAN are among our closest neighbours. They are our friends and increasingly our family as well.”

Additionally, ASEAN and Australia have common interests in defending the liberal multilateral trading system against the surging headwinds of protectionism and the unfolding “trade war” between the US and China. Together with Japan, Australia played a critical role in reviving the Trans-Pacific Partnership minus the US (TPP-11) in the form of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP). The same strong support would be critical to concluding the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). One of the strongest messages from Sydney is that “there were no protectionists around the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit table,” as pronounced by Turnbull, and that both sides would intensify efforts for a swift conclusion of the 16-country multilateral trade pact.

Apart from their common agenda for open and free trade, the ASEAN market of over 640 million people is also central to Australia’s economy. A high-profile Business Summit was held on the sidelines of the Special Summit to promote trade and investment ties. ASEAN is Australia’s third largest trading partner with the total trade value in 2016-2017 at AUS\$101 billion, greater than Australia’s trade with the US and Japan. Meanwhile, two-way ASEAN-Australia investment in 2016 was AUS\$224 billion, greater than that between Australia and China. Future opportunities for thriving economic ties between ASEAN and Australia most probably come from ASEAN’s great demand for infrastructure development, its drive for digital economy and smart cities, and the growth of its middle class which is projected by Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to reach 400 million by 2020.

Both sides should also leverage the social capital of the Southeast Asian diaspora in Australia where around one million citizens (or one in every 24 Australians) claim ASEAN ancestry. Thus far, this diaspora’s linkages back to the region are mostly through personal and family ties. They are also fragmented, coming from different Southeast Asian states. Yet, there is much potential to tap their networks to promote understanding of Southeast Asia among the Australian public, enriching the multi-cultural Australian society and bringing ASEAN closer to the country. Besides, it would help if an ASEAN-Australia Centre could be established to promote tourism, education, cultural and business links as well as bringing ASEAN to the Australian people, as China, Japan, South Korea and India have done so with considerable success.

The Special Summit brings home the fact that there is more to ASEAN-Australia affinity and commonality of interests than meets the eyes. Being small and medium-sized countries in a region under strategic transition, both sides should all hang together in defense of the inclusive and rules-based order, or they shall hang separately in an increasingly confused and contested world. 🇺🇦

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ASEAN-Australia Relations

ASEAN is Australia's



largest trading partner, after China and Japan, accounting for **15%** of Australia's total trade.¹

Australia is the **6th** largest **source of visitors** to ASEAN, accounting for 3.8% of total tourist arrivals in ASEAN in 2015.³



>105,000 Southeast Asian students studied in Australia in 2017, accounting for **16.8%** of total international students.⁷

AUS\$ 32.6 million: total ODA from Australia to ASEAN and Mekong region in 2017-18.¹

Five of Australia's **top 15** export markets in 2017 come from ASEAN:¹

- 9th** Singapore
- 11th** Malaysia
- 12th** Indonesia
- 13th** Vietnam
- 14th** Thailand

35% of the ASEAN-born population in Australia has a tertiary-level degree



compared with **15%** of the native-born population.⁸



>12,000 Australian businesses **export** to ASEAN, many of them are SMEs.¹

95% of Australia's FDI inflows to ASEAN in 2016 went to **Singapore** (US\$3.2 billion). **Vietnam** was the second largest FDI recipient from Australia with US\$231 million in 2016.²

Australia's major goods **exported** to ASEAN in 2016-2017 were:



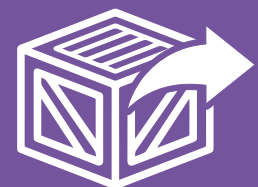
and major goods **imported** from ASEAN included:¹



4.2 million: Visitor arrivals from Australia to ASEAN in 2015, **doubling** the 2006 figure.³



1.37 million: Visitor arrivals from Southeast Asia to Australia in 2017.⁵



Education-related travel is Australia's largest **services** export to the ASEAN region and **crude petroleum** is the largest **goods** export.⁴



16% of Australia's imports came from ASEAN

11% of Australia's exports went to ASEAN in 2016-17.¹

AU\$ 57 million: Australia's funding for the ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program (AADCP) II 2008-2019⁶

US\$ 3.4 billion FDI inflows from Australia to ASEAN in 2016, an increase of **66%** compared to 2007.³



AU\$ 224 billion

Two-way investment between Australia and ASEAN in 2016, greater than that of Australia and China.⁴

Among ASEAN member states, **Indonesia** was the largest **importer** of goods from Australia (US\$5.3 billion)

while **Thailand** was the largest **exporter** to Australia (US\$10.3 billion) in 2016.²



11 cities/towns in Australia have direct flights to ASEAN.⁹



Share of total **Southeast Asians** studying in **Australia**:⁷

- 25%** Malaysia
- 22.5%** Vietnam
- 18.5%** Thailand



About **300** Australian SMEs are present in Malaysia.⁴



Australia's total trade value with ASEAN in 2016-17¹



860,000 Australian residents claimed an ASEAN country as their country of birth.



About **1,000,000** claimed ASEAN ancestry.



>700,000 Australians speak an ASEAN language.¹



>13,500 Australian undergraduate students have studied in ASEAN countries through the New Colombo Plan since 2014.⁵

11 cities in ASEAN have direct flights to Australia.⁹



>280 Australian companies in the Philippines operating in infrastructure, transport, financial services, mining, energy and shared services.⁴

1 Australia Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. 2 ASEAN Statistics Database, 2017. 3 ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2016/2017. 4 Commonwealth of Australia, 2017. 5 Australian Bureau of Statistics. 6 ASEAN-Australia Development Cooperation Program II. 7 Australia Department of Education and Training. 8 Migration Policy Institute, 2015. 9 Australia's Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development, and Cities, 2018

Myanmar's Ethnic Mosaic after the Rohingya Exodus

Nicholas Farrelly argues that peace building in Myanmar requires a re-think of the national mindset.

Myanmar is divided and deeply wounded by the categories that are supposed to unite its diverse peoples. From the hills of the north to the marshlands of the south, from war-ravaged villages to the lushest urban neighbourhoods, the definition of belonging is organised around a set of quasi-ethnographic understandings, shaped, too often, by majoritarian attitudes that are hostile to outsiders. In Myanmar today, Muslims have become vulnerable targets of intolerant and extremist attitudes.

The violent events of the past year, which have seen almost 700,000 Rohingya, a Muslim group from northern Rakhine State, flee their homes seeking sanctuary in Bangladesh are a stark reminder of how decades of negative socialisation and polarisation have torn communities apart. The justifications for targeting the Rohingya population come in simple statements about indigeneity, now tied to a blunt narrative of counter-terrorism. The coalition of elected, militarist and bureaucratic interests that run the government may not agree on everything, but the hard outline of the ethnic mosaic is their common shibboleth.

This tragedy in Myanmar has been centuries in the making, and the visceral reactions on the ground are a devastating illustration of what happens when a local history of the strong preying on the weak creates an entrenched culture of impunity. Few in Myanmar want to discuss what has been done, to whom, and why, because to accept responsibility is to embrace a picture of the country that will prove difficult, perhaps impossible, to resolve without a fundamental re-thinking of the national story.

Such a re-thinking can take place, and European experience after the Holocaust shows that dramatic shifts are possible. But there are few Southeast Asian examples of elites reckoning, thoroughly and transparently, with their errors, past or present. Myanmar still insists, both in official rhetoric and everyday argument, that its approach to ethnic categories is reasonable and deserving of external endorsement. Such a perspective may have had some merit before accusations of ethnic cleansing were made. But the terrain of debate, since the Rohingya exodus, has moved on. With increasing insistence, a full and open account from the Myanmar government of its actions is warranted.

At every opportunity, the Myanmar government and its spokespeople reinforce a story of the national mosaic: eight major ethnic groups, further divided into the 135 “official”

“It is still worth looking back: for clarity about what has happened and also in a search for justice for those who have suffered. But it is just as important that the people of Myanmar continue to look forward: perhaps to a comprehensive rethink of what it means to be a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society.”

national races. This notionally anthropological delineation shapes judgements about belonging along ethnic lines: Bamar, Shan, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, Rakhine, Mon, and Chin. All are deemed indigenous, although that is an assessment based on where you draw the lines in temporal and spatial terms.

Then there are the outsiders. The two-million or so Chinese in Myanmar are not a national race but have, in recent times, proved reasonably effective at finding ways to fit in, including as a category on official identification documents. For now it helps that most Chinese influences are deemed relatively benign, even positive, and the integration of Chinese families is so commonplace, that it is only the newest Chinese arrivals that tend to find themselves pushed to the outer.

Muslims, in some parts of the country, have generally not assimilated to the same extent, even though many have also adopted the Burmese language as their own, and tend, beyond their religious and cultural practices, to blur into the background of Myanmar society. Mosques are standard in cities and major towns. These sites of prayer, reflection and culture sometimes date back hundreds of years. Pre-colonial Myanmar welcomed Muslims, and once the British arrived the extent of Muslim settlement increased dramatically.

One of the complicating factors for today's Myanmar government is that British Burma saw an influx of people from across the empire and beyond. The British sought to re-structure society, empowering certain Indian and Chinese minorities and making sure that external forces loyal to the crown, not to local leaders, handled internal security. The system allowed for the exploitation of natural resources, but it rarely empowered the people or built local governance capacity. Burma remained a peripheral concern for the empire, and the borderlands between



Kutupalong Refugee Camp in Bangladesh

Wikipedia

British Bengal (modern-day Bangladesh) and the former Rakhine kingdom, were an exceptionally marginal zone. The migration of Muslims from further west made sense as a way of populating a region where anti-British sentiment among Buddhists had deep roots.

Nowadays, disagreement on what happened next, especially after independence, has influenced the violence and tensions in northern Rakhine State. Academic scholarship is deployed for partisan purposes, with both Muslims and Buddhists looking to historical sources to justify their narrow approach to today's problems. Yet the basic lack of tolerance for the Rohingya comes from layers of judgement about indigeneity and belonging that are integral to the idea of what it means to be Myanmar, as a nation and as a people.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) government, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, faces mounting criticism and condemnation by the international humanitarian community, the media, and at the United Nations. Yet at the same time, Aung San Suu Kyi, the elected leader of the country, continues to ride a wave of popular support. Among the Myanmar people at large, the Rohingya are an inconvenient after-thought, and government policy has reflected that widespread view. Of course, Aung San Suu Kyi's problems do not end with the Rohingya. She has to worry about the military stepping back into the political driver's seat. There is also the economy, which remains fragile. She has other serious ethnic conflicts to consider too, and a national peace and reconciliation process to make happen. Balancing these priorities means that there are, inevitably, invidious choices.

Tragically, last year's persecution of the Rohingya will be long remembered as a disconcerting and dark chapter in Myanmar history. And we should not ignore the fact that so many Rohingya are now stuck in Bangladesh, where they are struggling for survival. There are reports of outrageous human rights abuses which call for thorough investigation. Further humanitarian calamity is possible.

Under these conditions, it is still worth looking back: for clarity about what has happened and also in a search for justice for those who have suffered. But it is just as important that the people of Myanmar continue to look forward: perhaps to a comprehensive rethink of what it means to be a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Without at least considering the need to de-emphasise ethnic distinctions, there is every possibility that the Rohingya exodus of 2017 will not be the last time a persecuted minority is forced from its Myanmar home. 🇲🇲

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The Politics of Ethnicity in Myanmar: Forward to the Past

Robert H. Taylor unpacks the history of ethnic politics and tensions in Myanmar.

The complexity of the issues surrounding the fleeing of hundreds of thousands of persons from the northern areas of Myanmar's Rakhine State into the southern regions of the Chittagong Division of Bangladesh is portrayed in the media simplistically as a conflict between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists, supported by the Myanmar army. This shorthand is not wrong, but it does not go very far in understanding the long history of the current problem. In fact, similar flights, much less politicised and reported, had occurred, first in 1978 and secondly in 1992. After each of these incidents, the overwhelming majority returned to northern Rakhine State under agreement of the two neighbouring states.

The border between Bangladesh and Myanmar is highly porous. Before 1937, when British Burma ceased to be a province of British India, and after Myanmar gained independence with a new neighbour (at first East Pakistan and after 1971, Bangladesh), people moved easily from one jurisdiction to another. Historical memories of clashes between the two communities go back to the chaos that occurred at the start of the Pacific War in the then Burma with the withdrawal of the British administration. Left behind, the immigrant Bengali immigrant community, which worked the rice fields of central Rakhine, fled to the northern part of the state, while the Rakhine communities fled the hills to the north to seek shelter in the central regions. Communal clashes developed with no settled administration to keep them in check.

These communal clashes also stemmed from the conflation of race and religion that took place during the Burmese nationalist movements from the 1920s to 1940s. Burmese nationalists felt that their country was twice colonised, first by the British, and secondly by South Asians. As mentioned above, Burma was governed as a province of British India until 1937 during which South Asian immigrants and capital flowed freely into the colony. As a consequence, Buddhism was perceived as being in danger, particularly from the rapid growth of the South Asian Hindu and Muslim populations.

After independence, the citizenship laws of the Union of Burma automatically granted citizenship to persons whose ancestors were present prior to 1823 (the date when British colonisation of Rakhine and the southern part of Tanintharyi occurred). Given the prevalence of linguistic and ethnic distinctions among the population, such pre-colonial citizenship rights were articulated primarily in terms of membership of so-called indigenous ethnic groups, confusingly referred to in Myanmar as 'national races'. Persons whose ancestors settled in Myanmar after 1823 had the right to citizenship but were required to register and be so recognised in law.

“With the re-establishment of constitutional government since 2011, the recurring themes of ethnicity and religion have returned in both domestic and international guises, threatening to endanger the effort to establish a viable political system. The so-called Rohingya issue must be contextualised against this complex and complicated backdrop.”

However, very few did so, including the majority of persons who had settled in Myanmar from British India during the colonial period, thus placing themselves in legal limbo. To be fair to them, the post-independence governments of Myanmar, primarily concerned with suppressing various internal rebellions, most in the name of indigenous ethnicity, did not make it either obvious or easy for such persons to apply and be recognised as citizens. This remains the case and while the 1948 citizenship law has been superseded by



Humanitarian relief for displaced people in Rakhine (2012)

Wikimedia Commons



a much criticised 1982 citizenship law, the problem of both pieces of legislation is not in the laws themselves but in the failure to implement their provisions.

To compound the problem, ethnicity and race have been politicised throughout post-independence Myanmar history. During the first period of parliamentary government under Prime Minister U Nu, ethnicity was used as a negotiating tool in deals and concessions made in exchange for political support. The military socialist regime of General Ne Win failed to depoliticise the ethnicity issue. The current 2008 constitution, with the intention to accommodate expressions of ethnic identity, further perpetuates the centrality of ethnicity in Myanmar politics by maintaining seven ethnically designated states, seven geographically designated regions, and six autonomous zones with ethnic designations, and instituting 29 race affairs ministers in state and regional governments. With the re-establishment of constitutional government since 2011, the recurring

themes of ethnicity and religion have returned in both domestic and international guises, threatening to endanger the effort to establish a viable political system. The so-called Rohingya issue must be contextualised against this complex and complicated backdrop.

The term Rohingya, unknown in any colonial records, was coined after independence and became widely known only in this century. The term attempted to establish the point that there was a significant population of persons who may have once been considered (as the British did) as Chittagonians or Bengalis, but who rather have the right to such ethnic identity as given to the other indigenous ethnic groups in Myanmar, and therefore should be entitled to citizenship on the same basis. This claim is resisted vigorously by the majority Bamar and other indigenous communities, whether Buddhists or Christians, and in some cases Muslims, such as the Kaman ethnicity who also live in Rakhine State. To the majority of the Myanmar population, unlike the settled Muslim populations of Yangon, Mandalay and other cities, these people are illegal immigrants. The fact that they are followers of Islam merely heightens the antagonisms due to a folk belief among many Buddhists that there is a Muslim conspiracy to turn Myanmar from a predominantly Buddhist nation to a predominantly Muslim one.

Both sides of the Myanmar-Bangladesh border are now highly militarised. The Myanmar army is combatting both the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) and the pro-Buddhist Rakhine Arakan Army (AA) while the Bangladesh army has been confronting insurgency in the Chittagong hill tracts. Such conflicts are diversions from the resolution of the current problem, the root of which is whether the dislocated persons are citizens of Myanmar or Bangladesh. Until orderly government is restored, the persons affected will continue to face legal limbo with great uncertainty and hardship. Maintaining political order and reasoned politics are also subject to depoliticising ethnicity and race. This will prove extremely difficult in the present circumstances, as human rights are now confused with group aspirations in modern discourse. 🗨️

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Rohingya – the Name and its Living Archive

Jacques P. Leider deconstructs the living history of the name “Rohingya.”

The intriguingly opposing trends about using, not using or rejecting the name “Rohingya” illustrate a captivating history of the naming and self-identifying of Arakan’s Muslim community. Today, “Rohingya” is globally accepted as the name for most Muslims in North Rakhine. But authorities and most people in Myanmar still use the term “Bengalis” in referring to the self-identifying Rohingyas, linking them to Bangladesh and Burma’s own colonial past.

The recent change in the embrace of the name has been sudden and profound. Two decades ago, reports by humanitarian and human rights organisations on refugees in Bangladesh referred to the Muslims as “sometimes called...” or “also known as... Rohingyas,” showing the authors’ hesitation on how to apply the term. This reluctance has vanished. With the existential plight of the Rohingya continuing after 2012, the Bay of Bengal boat refugee crisis in 2015, and the Rohingya mass flight to Bangladesh of late 2016 and after August 2017, the use of the name “Rohingya” became entirely uncontroversial in the media outside Myanmar due to the transformative power of the country’s Islamophobic crisis. The change was an informal international recognition of the right to self-identification of a group of people that remain subject to ongoing state persecution.

The retrospective designation of Muslims as “Rohingya” in colonial accounts on Arakan among Rohingya writers is therefore not surprising. It connects to the group’s historical self-representation: Rohingyas lay claim to a rich and diverse Muslim history in Arakan’s past. Today the expanded usage of the name is favored by global acceptance and its status as the default name for most Muslims of Rakhine State. Nonetheless, the use of the name among the North Rakhine Muslim communities remains less clear.

The name “Rohingya” has a history, and that history is an integral part of the development of Muslim political self-affirmation and the ongoing process of collective identity formation in Rakhine State. It also reflects the contested relations between Muslims and Buddhists in Rakhine State after independence and the deterioration of state-minority relations. Studying these naming practices and their changes is therefore not a research on historical minutiae.

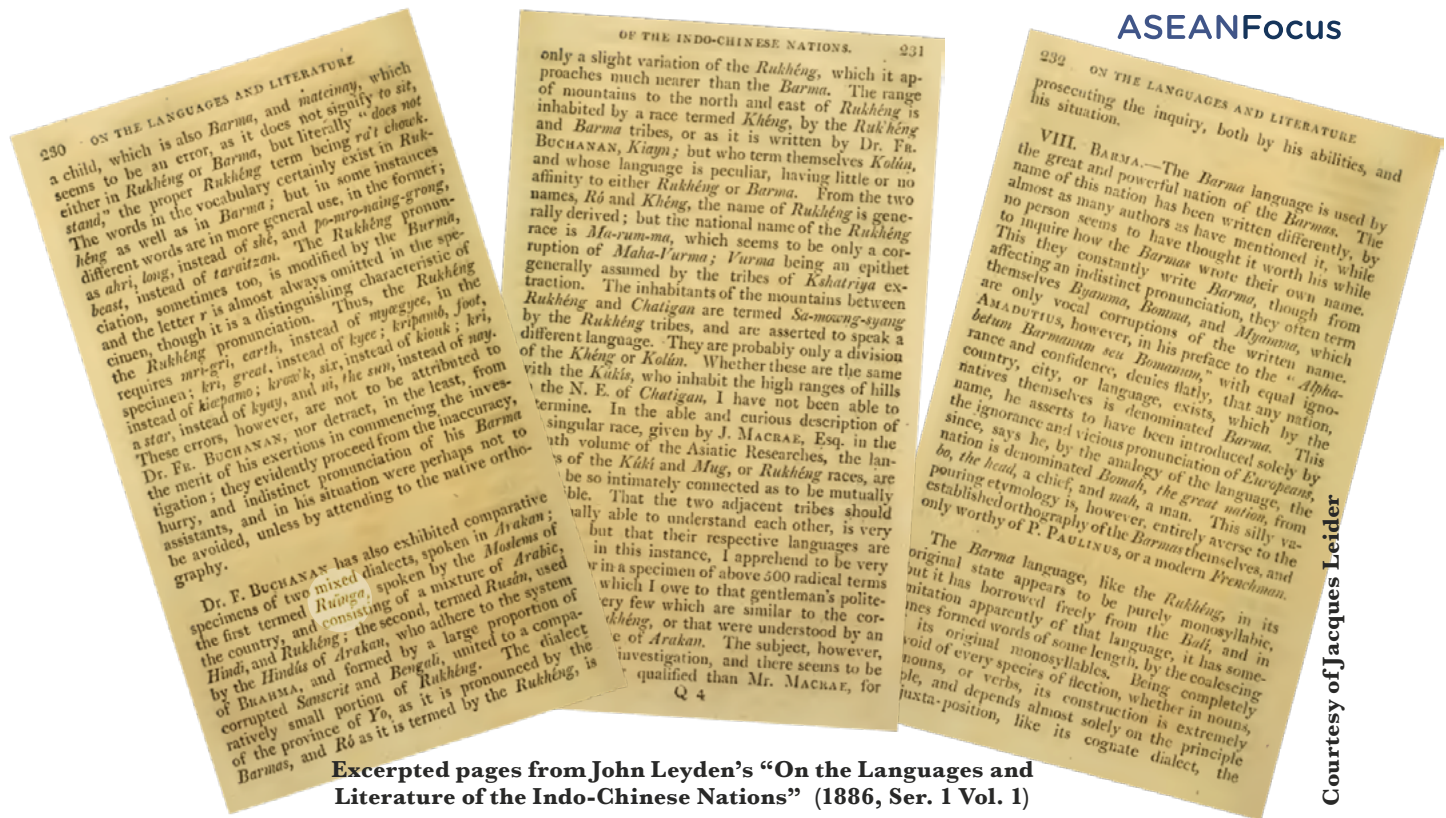
One spontaneous outcome of the name controversy since 2012 was ad-hoc compilations of source texts and references

to do research on the history of the Rohingya and the name itself. Rohingyas and pro-Rohingya activists were keen to prove that the Union of Burma had already recognised the Rohingya as an ethnic group in the 1950s and 1960s so that their citizenship rights could not be denied. Academics and independent researchers also formed archives containing official and non-official documents that allowed a close examination of the chronological record.

The most uncontroversial textual sources where the name “Rohingya” or its early variants have appeared include newspaper articles and booklets written and published by Rohingyas and their organisations over 1958-1965. This includes the years 1960 to 1964 when the Mayu Frontier Administration (MFA) existed in the North of Arakan. The MFA united in a single unit the Muslim-majority districts of Maungtaw, Buthidaung and partly Rathedaung. It was run by the army as a special frontier administration, but its creation provided the Rohingya leadership in Maungtaw with the political success of an “autonomous zone” that Arakanese Muslim leaders had been requesting since 1947.

The texts produced during the above period are uncontroversial because they use the name “Rohingya” univocally and intentionally to present, explain and promote a separate Muslim ethnic identity in association with Muslim pasts in Arakan drawing on Rakhine chronicles, colonial historiography and pre-colonial Indian and Western sources. Important publications of this genre were *A Short History of “Rohingyas” An Indigenous Race of the Union of Burma* (1960), *Report and Historical References regarding the ethnic Rohingyas, sons of the Union* (1961), and *Ethnic Rohingyas and Kaman* all written originally in Burmese (Mohammed A. Tahir Ba Tha, 1963).

The various spellings of the name at that time, including “Roewhnyas,” “Roewhengya,” “Ruhangya,” “Rawengya” or “Royangya,” demonstrate an oral presence of the term and the absence of a standardised spelling. Rakhine Buddhists noted that “Rwangya” was prominently used by the old Arakanese Muslim community around 1948-49. Internal communal differences with the more recent Chittagonian settlers who came as labor migrants during the colonial period still existed for several years after independence before they subsided and gave way to a shared identity. The adoption of “Rohingya” to affirm a common ethnic identity of all North Rakhine Muslims became a political choice in the 1950s due to the active



Excerpted pages from John Leyden's "On the Languages and Literature of the Indo-Chinese Nations" (1886, Ser. 1 Vol. 1)

Courtesy of Jacques Leider

role of young and educated Arakanese Muslims. But their branding was not uncontested. The politically influential but more traditional Arakan Muslim Organisation remained unconvinced about the need for a separate name.

Francis Buchanan-Hamilton's mention of "Rooinga" as a language of Arakanese Muslims deported to the royal capital Amarapura in the late 18th century shows that the word had existed in the East Bengali dialect spoken by Arakanese Muslims long before. However, its adoption in writing in the 1950s and in Muslim strategies of political and ethnic self-representation after Burma's independence was new. It did not appear in any British administrative record or any British census between 1869 and 1941. Therefore, even Burma experts were challenged to explain its etymology when it became newly known in the 1950s. The etymology is in fact unproblematic, as historical linguistics explain the term by its link to the literary Bengali word for Arakan.

In circumstances where the term "Rohingya" was used by Burmese high-level officials, interpretations should be made with reference to the appropriate context. Two famous examples call for attention: Prime Minister U Nu used the term Rohingya in a radio-talk in September 1954; and Brigadier General Aung Gyi paid recognition to the Rohingya as a national ethnic group in a speech in 1961. Both instances have been cited by Rohingya activists as proofs that Rohingyas had been recognised by the state as a "national race." Yet from a formal and legal point of view, these interpretations seem a bit far-fetched. However, the citations of the name made a lot of political sense as there was an intention by the Burmese leadership to cultivate friendship with and gain the support of North Arakan Muslim leaders at that time.

Identity cards held by Muslims where the name "Rohingya" was entered by the state bureaucracy appear as more convincing proofs to demonstrate that at times the term was

actually perceived by administrators as an ethno-religious designation. Photos of such identity cards are circulated on websites. The article on "Rohingya" in the official Burmese Encyclopedia in 1964 showed that under the MFA, the emerging Rohingya movement enjoyed political toleration and a semblance of state recognition that fell apart in the 1960s. When General Ne Win took power in 1962, his nationalist and unitary policies changed the political context, refusing to recognise an ethnic Rakhine Muslim identity. The MFA was suppressed in 1964 and the Rohingya ideology emerging during the parliamentary phase died an early death. It moved into exile with many Rohingya leaders leaving Burma in the 1970s and the creation of the Arakan Historical Society in Chittagong in 1975.

The formation of shared Muslim identities in North Rakhine has persisted nevertheless under past authoritarian regimes and the current government. The name "Rohingya" remains alive as a rallying cry for a defined Muslim ethnic identity. While the formation of a single Muslim community as a social reality in Rakhine State raises no doubts, the link between this process and the use of the name Rohingya within Muslim communities in Rakhine State should still be considered as a question of scholarly debate. The claims of a perpetual or millenary Rohingya identity, prevalent in the political propaganda of Rohingya militants and in recent media reports, essentialises what is certainly a dynamic process. Any discussion of contemporary Rohingya identities needs to look at the living archive of the name, taking into consideration a vast and complex human Rohingya network that stretches from Southeast Asia to the Middle East and beyond, comprising hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees who lay claim to a shared identity that cuts across very different national contexts. 🌐

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Diversity in Myanmar: Burden and Bridge

Nyunt Maung Shein highlights the urgency of bridging the trust deficit on the Rakhine issue.

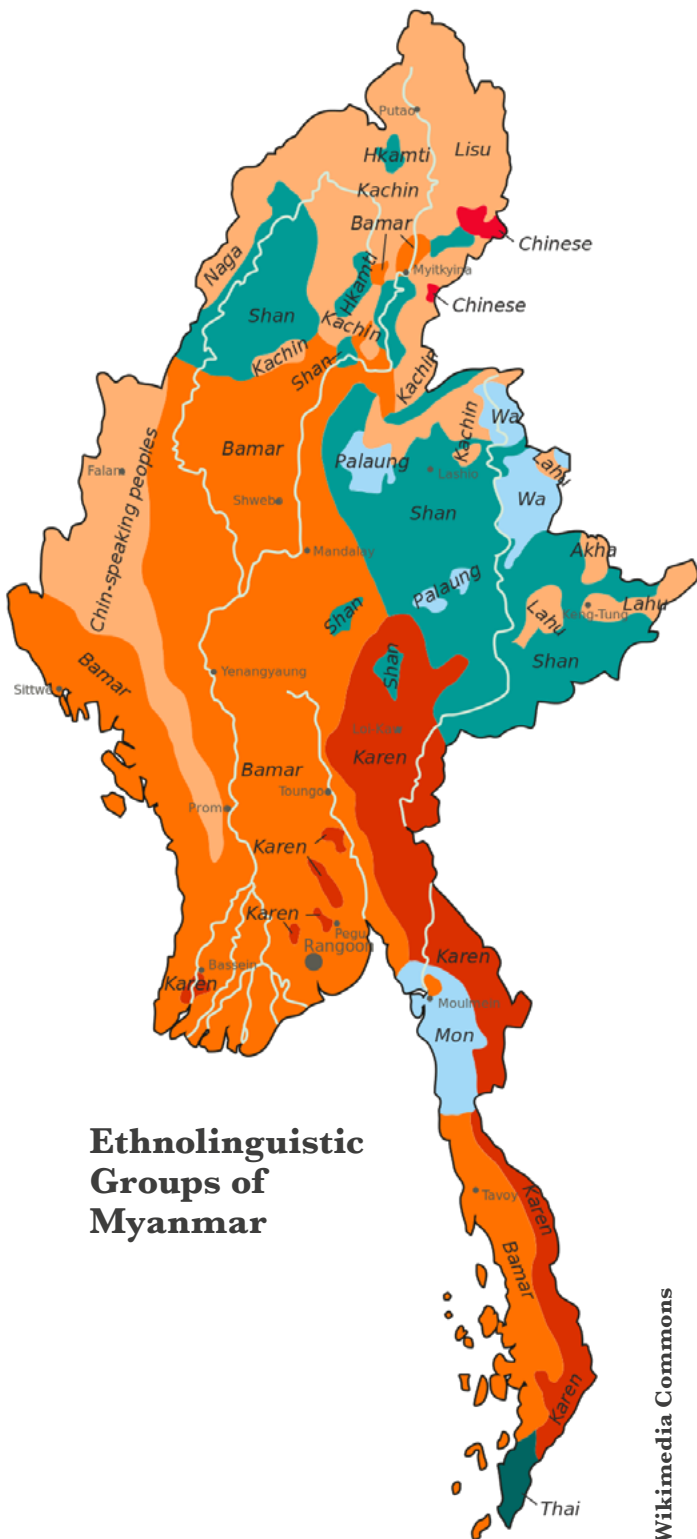
Diversity – ethnic, racial, religious, cultural, linguistic – is found everywhere in the world. This requires peace and harmony between and among different groups in any society and nation-state, for development that benefits all. In many parts of the world, diversity offers abundant opportunities, but for others it creates many problems. This has been the experience of Myanmar, which has over 100 ethnic groups and a large population of both legal and illegal immigrants.

Myanmar’s diversity is largely a colonial legacy, and a persistent challenge for successive national governments since 1948 in building a peaceful and harmonious country. Their efforts for national reconciliation have achieved varying degrees of success, but Myanmar as a nation still has a long way to go to reach that goal of being conflict-free domestically.

Reviewing the various approaches and efforts towards this goal throughout Myanmar’s modern history, I can safely say that the current National League for Democracy (NLD) government and its immediate predecessor, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) government, have exerted the most effort in bringing the parties concerned to the table to discuss relevant issues and concerns. The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), initiated by the USDP government, was signed by eight (out of 16) armed ethnic groups in October 2015, and the NLD government has welcomed two more signatories via the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conferences held bi-annually.

The national reconciliation roadmap, however, has been marred by the extremist attacks on police/security posts in Maungta in northern Rakhine State, in October 2016 and again in August 2017 – the latest in many similar assaults throughout Myanmar’s post-independence history. It is doubly unfortunate that the attacks have been made in the name of ethno-religious nationalism, causing deep divisions with the indigenous ethnic Rakhine and other smaller indigenous ethnic groups living in Rakhine. Admittedly, the negative sentiments have been compounded over decades due to the neglect of socio-economic development in Rakhine State, which is the second poorest region in the country.

The 2016 and 2017 attacks have brought all this to a head, with myriad calls for solutions to different aspects of the problem. For the Myanmar leadership, restoring order and



Ethnolinguistic Groups of Myanmar

Wikimedia Commons

stability in Rakhine State became the first priority while international humanitarian and human rights groups have focused on the plight of the people who crossed the border to Bangladesh in the wake of the attacks. Amidst news reports of the mounting numbers in refugee camps, and the potential threat that these communities face over being exploited or trafficked, Myanmar and Bangladesh have reached agreement on repatriating them to Rakhine. Myanmar has been ready to receive the returnees since 23 January 2018. During the Myanmar-Bangladesh meeting for cooperation on bilateral security and law enforcement held in Dhaka on 17 February 2018, the Bangladesh Minister for Home Affairs gave for the first time a list of 8,032 persons from 1,673 families to his Myanmar counterpart. The bilateral agreements on repatriation include provisions for Myanmar to review and verify the lists provided by Bangladesh.

For Myanmar, the Rakhine issue is a huge challenge of enormous dimensions – sovereignty and territorial integrity, national security, rule of law, threats of terrorism and extremism, the concerns of indigenous ethnic groups, socio-development for all communities in Rakhine State, their humanitarian needs, protection of their human rights, and Myanmar-Bangladesh bilateral relations. All these aspects require a lot of attention and effort if a solution to the Rakhine issue is to be found.

The Myanmar Institute for Strategic and International Studies has been discussing various aspects of the Rakhine issue with various partner institutes in policy and academia – particularly those in other ASEAN member states – to identify and recommend possible solutions based on Myanmar’s unique circumstances. A workshop on 21 February 2018 was convened in Yangon for this very purpose. Myanmar researchers and policy practitioners are also engaging in dialogue with their Bangladesh counterparts, on neutral grounds, to discuss and identify policy inputs for governments of both sides.

At the policy level, the Myanmar government has two working channels to address the issue. The first is the national-level Committee for Implementation of Recommendations on Rakhine State, which is supported by an Advisory Board comprising international and Myanmar experts on peace and reconciliation. The second is the Union Enterprise for Humanitarian Assistance, Resettlement and Development, under the purview of the State Counsellor’s office. Myanmar has also accepted bilateral programmes of assistance from fellow ASEAN member states and other partners in Asia. Recently, at the ASEAN-Australia Special Summit held in Sydney, Australia in March 2018, State Counsellor Daw

“There is an urgent need to bridge the trust deficit that is now widening domestically, bilaterally, and at regional and international levels over this issue. Think-tanks, research institutes, and the media all have important roles to play in bringing more nuance and understanding to the divergent narratives that are currently contributing to further misunderstandings.”

Aung San Suu Kyi also briefed her ASEAN and Australian counterparts on the situation and discussed possibilities for capacity-building support to address the Rakhine issue.

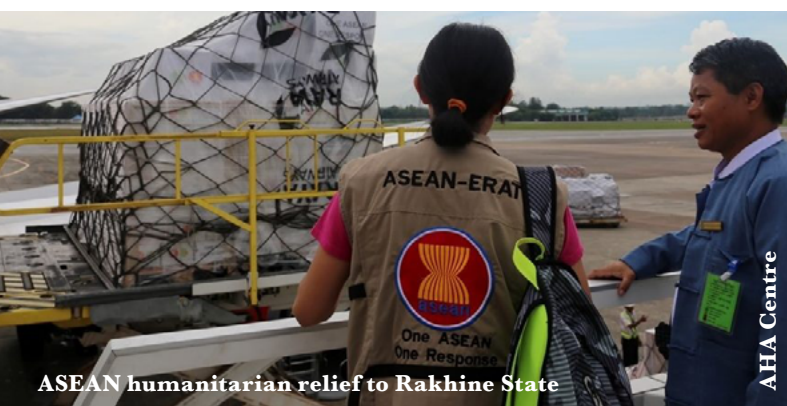
In the meanwhile, there is an urgent need to bridge the trust deficit that is now widening domestically, bilaterally, and at regional and international levels over this issue. Think-tanks, research institutes, and the media all have important roles to play in bringing more nuance and understanding to the divergent narratives that are currently contributing to further misunderstandings. More dialogue and consultations among academics, scholars, media and think-tanks are thus necessary to help find ways and means to start the healing and reconciliation process. Myanmar and Bangladesh think-tanks have started this process. Both sides are also aware of the need to involve or consult community and civil society representatives. At the regional level, ASEAN member states, and external partners such as China, Japan, and India can all help to lend their constructive engagement to facilitate greater dialogue.

All this is being done with the intention of seeking a comprehensive and sustainable solution to bring about peace, harmony and development in Myanmar. To address the burden of diversity, efforts must be made to bridge the development and perception gaps in Rakhine State. In this process, no immigrant, both legal and illegal, should be left behind. ❧

Ambassador Nyunt Maung Shein is Chairman of the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS), and former Permanent Representative of Myanmar to the United Nations in Geneva and former Head of the Boundary Affairs Division at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Myanmar.

Reconciling ASEAN's Non-Interference with Regional Engagement

Moe Thuzar and **Hoang Thi Ha** urge ASEAN to persist in its quiet diplomacy and engagement with Myanmar.



ASEAN humanitarian relief to Rakhine State

The Myanmar military's disproportionate retaliation to the August 2017 attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) precipitated the largest (to date) exodus of self-identified Rohingyas, mainly to Bangladesh and to some ASEAN member states. This exodus presents a twin disaster of humanitarian and security implications on such a scale that the ASEAN member states can no longer stand behind the "non-interference" shield. Many in ASEAN have expressed their view that the situation presents an inflection point. Most ASEAN member states with the exception of Myanmar view the situation in Rakhine as a regional problem warranting some form of regional response.

ASEAN can no longer skirt around the problem nor frame it as an issue of illegal migration and trafficking in persons, which is more a by-product than the source problem. Since 2017, ASEAN has been more vocal in expressing its concerns to Myanmar over this issue, publicly and behind closed doors. Recently, the Press Statement by Singapore – current ASEAN Chair – at the AMM Retreat in February 2018 "stressed the need to find a comprehensive and durable solution to address the root causes of the conflict and to create a conducive environment so that the affected communities can rebuild their lives."

Normatively, the non-interference principle is not insurmountable. The ASEAN Charter balances it with collective responsibility and enhanced consultations on matters seriously affecting ASEAN common interest. This is because challenges confronting ASEAN nowadays

have become more transnational in nature and impact as the region is getting more integrated and connected. The Rohingya crisis is one such challenge with serious humanitarian and migration repercussions. The conflation of religion, identity and ethnicity in Rakhine State has also unleashed a visceral level of hatred that could lead to radicalisation and extremism, as well as threaten the values of inclusivity and moderation that hold ASEAN's diverse societies together. Intense international criticism of reported human rights abuses and the Myanmar government's lack of openness have also affected ASEAN's commitment to a people-centred community.

Historically, ASEAN member states have responded to the humanitarian fallout of crises or conflicts that occurred within one country, but with cross-border spill over. Provision of humanitarian assistance, and more robust interventions, including mediation and deployment of peace-keeping forces, have been effected either under the ASEAN umbrella or through bilateral, trilateral and even inter-regional arrangements.

Indonesia and Thailand individually offered shelter to Vietnamese boat-people in the 1970s. Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand contributed personnel to the international peace-keeping force in East Timor in 1999, and participated in the EU-led monitoring mission for the implementation of the Aceh peace agreement in 2005. Malaysia played a crucial mediating role in the Mindanao peace process that led to the signing of the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. During the Marawi crisis in 2017, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on Disaster Management (AHA Centre) as well as Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore provided relief supplies for displaced persons and/or military assistance to the Philippine government.

As regards Myanmar, ASEAN's bridging role in coordinating the international community's disaster relief to Cyclone Nargis victims in 2008 is oft-cited as a successful case of ASEAN's constructive engagement with the once-reclusive country. The 2008 cyclone response served as a catalyst to Myanmar's political opening a few years later. The substantial experience and available facilities built up

in this field places ASEAN in a prime position to continue humanitarian assistance to affected communities in Rakhine.

However, unlike the Nargis response, the current Myanmar government prefers direct engagement with countries offering assistance. ASEAN's approach should thus leverage on and synergise ASEAN-wide institutions and bilateral support from individual member states. Since October 2017, the AHA Centre has facilitated both the provision of relief items to the displaced communities, and the procurement of financial and other assistance from several ASEAN member states and Dialogue Partners.

Myanmar is working with Bangladesh on repatriating the refugees. But repatriation has been delayed due to the fear of many Rohingyas over precarious conditions and continued persecution upon return. Myanmar is also grappling with the resettlement of repatriated refugees from Thailand. ASEAN can give meaningful assistance to both processes by mobilising resources to help build villages and provide necessary utilities for the returnees. Beyond that, a bolder move would be to offer an ASEAN observer mission to witness a "safe, secure and dignified repatriation process". This is not beyond the realm of possibility, given the precedent of ASEAN's observers at Myanmar's 2012 by-elections.

Beyond the immediate need of humanitarian relief, efforts should focus on building trust and reconciliation among the different communities, especially the Rakhine and the Rohingya. Because of their entrenched distrust and resentment over decades, any long-term solution must take into consideration the voices of all communities on the ground, promote inter-communal understanding and expand their shared living space. Some ASEAN member states, especially Indonesia, have considerable experience to help Myanmar in this respect. Since 2014, Indonesia has initiated school and hospital projects in Rakhine. An Indonesia-funded hospital to be completed this year in Myaung Bwe will provide health services for all, regardless of race or religion. Rakhine and Rohingya community leaders have made study trips to Indonesia and other ASEAN member states to learn about experiences in tackling multi-cultural and multi-racial issues.

ASEAN can also develop sectoral initiatives that address different dimensions of the issue. The ASEAN political-security sectors may look at cross-border management

and prevention of radicalisation; the economic and socio-cultural sectors may focus on constructive interventions for socio-economic development and capacity-building for resilient communities. ASEAN can work with the Advisory Board on Implementing the Recommendations on Rakhine to identify initiatives where ASEAN's contribution could be most practical and impactful. During a recent meeting with Singapore Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai – the Advisory Board's Chairman, former Thai Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister – also urged ASEAN to take a more active role, especially in improving medical services in Rakhine State.

Throughout this process, ASEAN should keep to its quiet diplomacy that relies on peer persuasion and pressure instead of grandstanding and adversarial posturing. Quiet diplomacy enables ASEAN to build bridges and help affected people on the ground. It was through dialogue and consultation that the grouping broke through the reluctance of the Myanmar military government to deliver post-Nargis humanitarian assistance. Indonesia's quiet diplomacy persuaded the new government under Aung San Suu Kyi to convene a special ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in December 2016 to discuss the situation in Rakhine for the first time. Myanmar has since continued to brief ASEAN counterparts at ASEAN Summits and foreign ministers meetings. In this instance, quiet diplomacy speaks loudly of ASEAN's collegial manner in handling the most delicate and sensitive of issues.

ASEAN's efforts must be matched by the confidence that Myanmar should place in ASEAN's institutions and processes, building on the trust reservoir that ASEAN has earned through its persistent engagement with Myanmar against all odds when the country was internationally isolated. The meaning of a resilient community lies not only in other fellow members' offers of assistance but also the confidence by the concerned country to accept these offers. It requires a sense of constructive compromise, bearing in mind national sensitivities and regional concerns. As former Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has remarked, ASEAN member states can be both "nationally focused and regionally sensitive." 🇲🇻

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Boxes containing the 'ASEAN Family Kit' arrive in Myanmar

Reporting Rakhine: The View from the Editorial Room

In this section, senior management personalities from three major news outlets with wide circulation reaching different audiences in Myanmar – *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, *Frontier Myanmar* and *The Voice* – share with us their views and experiences in reporting the situation in Rakhine.

THE GLOBAL NEW LIGHT OF MYANMAR

U Aye Min Soe, Chief Editor of the Global New Light of Myanmar, a government-owned newspaper published by the Ministry of Information and based in Yangon, Myanmar

The Myanmar government has taken two approaches to enable reporting on the situation in Rakhine State after the terrorist attacks, namely: (a) arranging trips for local and foreign news agencies to enter the afflicted areas in Rakhine State; and (b) establishing state-owned media in Maungtaw District to gather information and provide up-to-date reports. These activities are coordinated by the Ministry of Information (MOI), and reported in *The Global New Light of Myanmar*, together with other editorials and news reports on Rakhine.

Since the terrorist attacks in October 2016, the MOI has organised a total of nine trips to Rakhine State for news agency representatives, journalists and reporters, and members of the diplomatic corps. The first trip was from 19-22 December 2016 with 13 reporters. In 2017, six trips were undertaken in March, April, July, August and September, involving around 100 reporters. The 27 September 2017 trip included members of the diplomatic corps as well as representatives from local and foreign news agencies.

This year, the MOI partnered with the Rakhine State Government and the Myanmar Press Council to organise a press trip for 31 reporters from 6-8 January. The MOI also put into motion plans for twice-monthly trips to Rakhine for news agencies. The most recent trip was from 16-18 March comprising 12 reporters representing foreign news agencies.

A number of state-owned media outlets are also working actively in Maungtaw District to provide up-to-date reports on the ground. Since 26 October 2017, a team of reporters and staff from state-owned media have been stationed in Maungtaw. The Rakhine State Government formed a “Committee for True News” on 27 August 2017 to work closely with the news teams in Maungtaw.

Local media outlets in Rakhine State, such as Sittway Ethnic Bureau and Sittway Sub-Printing House, together with 22 Information and Public Relations departments in Rakhine

at state, district, township and town levels, contribute to news-gathering in Rakhine.

Additionally, starting 1 February 2017, the MOI established May Yu FM Radio as a dedicated broadcasting service in Buthidaung, Yethaedaung, and Maungtaw Districts where there are larger numbers of Bengali communities. May Yu FM daily broadcasts are in three languages, Rakhine, Myanmar and Bengali, to keep local residents informed of the evolving situation. Broadcast information includes activities of the government in these districts, such as information on humanitarian aid, rescue and rehabilitation activities, information about immigration, and weather updates. The transmission of May Yu FM is currently being tested, with three 40-minute programme broadcasts in the morning and another three 40-minute programme broadcasts throughout the rest of the day.

FRONTIER LEADING THE WAY MYANMAR

Thomas Kean, Editor-in-Chief at Frontier Myanmar, a fortnightly English-language magazine based in Yangon

In late September 2017, the Ministry of Information called for a full-day meeting among Myanmar’s leading publishers to seek their advice on how to countervail international media reporting on the Rakhine issue. The response from the publishers was mixed. Some were unenthusiastic, as doing so might undercut their credibility. They also questioned the veracity of the “news” that the government was releasing.

Instead of engaging constructively with the media, the government has been using state-controlled and social media channels to counter and discredit the international narrative. Reports of abuses, ethnic cleansing or genocide have been countered with statements that these are overblown allegations with no evidence. At the same time, local and international media do not have full access to Rakhine to ascertain the government investigation findings. International media’s efforts to unearth the truth or discuss the different dimensions of the crisis have been either demonised or obstructed.

For the few media organisations inside the country seeking to report in an impartial manner, the environment has

become particularly unfavourable, especially after the August 2017 attacks by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army. Tensions were such that we felt reporting in a factual, non-biased way on the conflict made us vulnerable to attack – physical or otherwise. Advertisers threatened to pull out, readers to cancel subscriptions. Government officials made veiled threats.

But we made a decision to stick to our journalistic values. We have sent a photographer and reporter to the refugee camps in Bangladesh (apparently, we are the only Myanmar media organisation to have done so). We cover government statements and the occasional press conferences held in Nay Pyi Taw and Yangon, as well as reports and statements released by human rights groups and the international community. One of our journalists went independently to Maungtau in early September 2017 where he narrowly avoided an attack from a Rakhine mob. We have also sent journalists on government-organised reporting trips.

Frontier Myanmar occupies a unique position, straddling both local and international media. It is a Myanmar-owned publication but has a small number of foreign editors on staff, who have worked in the country for more than five years. It is domestically focused on Myanmar, yet understands international perceptions and concerns. The values that we, including our large team of Myanmar staff, embody, embrace and support – human rights, transparency, accountability, justice and tolerance – are in many ways alien to modern Myanmar.

At the same time, we are keenly aware of the sensitivities and opinions of the majority of Myanmar people, and try to reflect them in our reporting. We have at times used our editorials to explain what we are doing and why – most explicitly with the piece, “Why we went to Bangladesh,” which was published in tandem with our first staff article from Cox’s Bazar. However, facts are facts, and news is news. We uphold balanced reporting, which requires coverage of all sides, not just government or military statements.

Myanmar’s media industry has been damaged badly by the Rakhine crisis. The government’s approach – not dissimilar to that being employed in some other countries around the world – is not helpful and has undermined public trust in media organisations and journalists. It may take years for that trust to be recovered – if indeed it can be at all.

The VOICE

Zeya Thu, Deputy Chief Editor and Columnist of The Voice daily journal in Myanmar

Since August 2017, the situation in Rakhine has become a central issue of heated debate, with extensive media coverage internationally and locally. The multi-faceted issue is the elephant in the room whether one is reporting on economy, government performance, international relations or terrorist threats. The sensitivities surrounding the issue have made reporting on or analysing Rakhine more challenging than other important issues in Myanmar’s

transition, such as the armed conflict between the military and ethnic insurgent groups.

First of all, Rakhine’s complexity is unique, even by Myanmar standards. While resource-rich, it is the second poorest state in Myanmar. Enduring ethnic awareness among the Rakhine since their subjugation by Burmese kings in the 18th century has been heightened with political and socio-economic transformations taking place after the end of decades-long authoritarian rule. The Arakan National Party, which won the majority of the seats in the state parliament in the 2015 elections, has clashed with the ruling National League for Democracy on issues related to political representation. Rakhine state’s porous border with Bangladesh, coupled with out-migration of Rakhine people to other parts of Myanmar and neighboring countries in search of jobs has made many Rakhine people feel insecure against the self-identified Rohingya. Simmering tensions and mistrust between the two groups over the decades were heightened after communal clashes in 2012. A relatively new ethnic Rakhine armed group called the Arakan Army added another complication to Myanmar’s long-running efforts of peace-building. Rakhine state also lies at the regional geo-economic crossroads, providing direct access to the Indian Ocean for both China and India’s land-locked northeastern states.

Contextualising the complexity in reporting on Rakhine faces further complications due to current sentiments in Myanmar. Many are not happy with the intense pressure on, and criticism towards Myanmar from the international community. They feel victimised by what they perceive as biased international reporting. To help Myanmar audiences grasp the Rakhine implications, Myanmar-language news outlets like *The Voice* try to highlight the importance of the external context in our analyses. Thus, instead of blow-by-blow news reports, we focus on editorials and op-eds that discuss the situation of foreign governments putting pressure on Myanmar, the role of the United Nations and ASEAN, similar incidents and precedents in world history which could inform responses to the current situation.

All this is being done in a situation where media literacy remains generally low among Myanmar people. People do not know what to expect of media and the role of media in democratic societies. Some still harbor suspicions towards local and international media. Until 2011, everything including advertisements was pre-and-post-censored. Draconian censorship laws were abolished only in 2012 and private news dailies were allowed the following year. The media in Myanmar are still learning-by-doing. Even with media freedom, we sometimes face ‘two steps forward, one step back.’ Court cases against media are on the rise again. Local media’s access to Rakhine is limited. Some government officials are reluctant to talk to media or share relevant information.

The Rakhine issue is a game changer for Myanmar in several ways, including for its nascent media field. It not only tests the boundaries and capacities of Myanmar media but also offers learning experiences for Myanmar professionals as we try to grasp the complex situation in Rakhine from an objective and independent perspective. ■

Rohingya and Rakhine Voices

Rohingya and Rakhine communities co-exist in northern Rakhine State. Negative sentiments on both sides towards each other is a key dynamic in the tensions that have ebbed and flowed over the years. Any discussion on the future of Rakhine should take heed of these voices. ASEANFocus thus sought views from both Rohingya and Rakhine communities on their experiences and perspectives regarding the situation in Rakhine. The Rohingya voices were obtained from two focus group discussions with displaced Rohingya women in Bangladesh and Malaysia. They have requested that their identity be kept anonymous.

ROHINGYA VOICES

A Rohingya woman in Kuala Lumpur

“I have fled my country many times, been a refugee many times. I was a refugee at the age of 5, my daughter was a refugee at the age of 15. In 1992 I was repatriated from Bangladesh to Myanmar. We went to a community meeting in the morning in the camp where we were made to line up in two lines, and then forced onto truck, then a boat. We didn’t know what was happening. Then we were in Myanmar in a repatriation centre where we had prints of our fingers and toes taken. When we returned home nothing had changed, there were soldiers everywhere and the killing continued and women were being abused. My family members were arrested 4 times and we had to pay for them to be released. Our livestock was taken. So finally, we left for Malaysia.”

A Rohingya woman in Bangladesh

“Nobody wants us. In Myanmar they told us we were guests on their land. In Bangladesh they tell us we are guests on their land. We don’t belong anywhere but we have always lived on this land for hundreds of years. How can we not belong here?”

A Rohingya woman in Kuala Lumpur

“We want to go home, but not as rubbish. Not as dirt that nobody wants. If we go back we need to have rights like everyone else. We just want to be treated like everyone else. We are not asking for more than that.”

A Rohingya woman in Bangladesh

“I never knew I could feel such peace. Even though now I have nothing and everything is gone, at least I can sleep safe at night and know my children will not be hurt.”

A Rohingya woman in Bangladesh

“I can’t think about the future. All I can think about is tomorrow and the day after. Anything more than that and I start to cry. Where will my children go to school? Where will we live? How will we survive? We can’t possibly stay here forever, can we? But I talk to other women who say we will stay here. There is no other place for us in this world.”



A Rohingya refugee carries his mother at the Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh on 23 January 2018.



RAKHINE VOICES

U Ba Tun, retired colonel, ethnic Rakhine

“The United Nations, Western countries and other international organisations are pressuring Myanmar to accept the term ‘Rohingya.’ We cannot accept this term since they are Bengali who came as farm labor under the British colonial rule and some of them are part of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA).

The government must provide sustainable security for the Rakhine people. The army should deploy permanent security troops in Maungtaw region or form Rakhine militias. All Rakhine political parties and civil organisations must be united against ARSA insurgents.”

U Hla Myint, Spokesperson for Arakan League for Democracy (ALD), ethnic Rakhine and native of Maungtaw township

“Since Myanmar gained independent in 1948, successive governments of Myanmar neglected Rakhine people’s interests and security. Now Rakhine people have lost trust in the government. We supported Aung San Suu Kyi in the past but she failed to consult with Rakhine people on the Bengali issue. Rakhine people are not informed of the future plan of the National League for Democracy-led government to solve the crisis in Maungtaw. We do not trust international organisations either. Before 1992, none of them operated in Rakhine and both communities lived peacefully.

Repatriation alone cannot solve the problem. The government must provide the rule of law and security in Rakhine State, especially Maungtaw. The government should also stop corruption by local authorities which allow illegal migration of Bengalis.”

Dr. Tin Mar Aung, former Chief of Staff of ASSK and Secretary of Dr Saw Mra Aung Foundation, ethnic Rakhine:

“The Bengali are migrants who came to work in Myanmar during the British colonial rule as seasonal labourers. They are not ethnic to the land and the majority of them do not speak Myanmar’s national language nor Rakhine language. Many of them were involved in the terrorist

attacks in October 2016 and August 2017. It is therefore the duty of the military to protect Myanmar citizens and make Rakhine a safe area.

International reporting on the issue has been biased, fabricated and prejudiced, covering only one side and not the whole reality, exaggerating some facts to create sensational reports, and using some old and wrong pictures. Many media outlets just copy from one another and repeat the same thing, which undermines their credibility.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar government’s communication on this issue has been slow and infrequent. There is also lack of transparency and insufficient explanation on what happened and how the government has responded. The public therefore had to rely on social media such as videos and photos shared on Facebook, which is possible in this age of instant messaging and thanks to the bravery of those who shared.

The government’s response so far has not taken into account the voice of Rakhine ethnic citizens. Many committees have been formed but coordination is lacking and implementation is delayed, creating confusions among the Rakhine population and raising questions about what the plan is to move forward and where the donations have gone to.

The government should listen to the local Rakhine voice and look into their needs, especially their safety and security including protection and safety plan for each village, proper border protection, speedy provision of National Verification Cards (NVCs) for qualified ethnic people, tackling bribery and corruption related to drugs and human trafficking, capacity building for the locals, and build more sustainable Rakhine villages. Furthermore, the government should not rush to impose the “Living together” formula in severely affected areas, and should start with promoting social harmony and trade ties first. The Rakhine State’ local authorities, civil society organisations and citizens should be part of a multi-stakeholder process, from the planning to the implementation stage. Just paying official visits or holding meetings will not solve the problem.”

Insider Views: Bridging the Gap on the Rakhine Issue

Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai, Chairman of the Advisory Board to the Committee on the Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State, explains the Advisory Board's mandate and its efforts to bridge the gap of perception and help affected people on the ground.

AF: *What is the main function of the Advisory Board for the Committee for Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State? Why would the Board matter or make a difference given the failure of other past attempts?*

SURAKIART: The Advisory Board is tasked to report to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi with advice and recommendations through the Implementation Committee led by the Minister for Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, Dr. Win Myat Aye, on how the recommendations in the 2017 Report of the Kofi Annan Commission concerning the situation in Rakhine can be implemented.

It is not the intention of the Advisory Board to become another investigative or fact-finding mission. We aim to come up with practical advice on how things on the ground can be improved and how implementation of the recommendations of the Kofi Annan report can be sustainable. We have identified five areas, as contained in our Press Statement of 25 January 2018, that we believe the Myanmar Government should address.

Our advice has been well received, not only by the international community on the whole, but also by the Myanmar Government which seems to have started implementing some of the advice. The manner in which advice is given can often be important, including by whom. The composition of the Advisory Board with its wealth of experience and expertise puts it in a unique position to reach out to the various stakeholders – the groups on the ground, the UN agencies, international non-governmental organisations (iNGOs) and interested nations. We will try through open and honest conversations to help bridge the gap in perception among the various stakeholders. We will look to the future, not the past.

AF: *How were the 10 members of the Advisory Board selected, and what is the modus operandi of the Board?*

SURAKIART: The members of the Advisory Board were personally selected by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The Advisory Board is composed of four international members – from South Africa, Sweden, Thailand and the United Kingdom – and five distinguished and well-qualified Myanmar members. We work on the basis of consensus although each member can express their views freely, but not in a manner that would affect the efficacy of the work

of the Advisory Board. We operate through a process of consultations with all relevant stakeholders before presenting our recommendations to the Implementation Committee and the Myanmar Government.

AF: *The Advisory Board has been under greater scrutiny after former New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson resigned from the Board with negative remarks about the Board as well as the Myanmar Government and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. What brought about this public airing of his criticisms and how has this incident affected the Board's work?*

SURAKIART: It was unfortunate that Governor Richardson had to be asked by the Myanmar Government to no longer serve on the Advisory Board due to seemingly different agendas that did not focus on the situation of Rakhine, the Muslim minority, and the Kofi Annan recommendations. His departure took place only after the second day of Advisory Board meetings with activities in Nay Pyi Taw. The Advisory Board continued with our meetings in Nay Pyi Taw, our trip to Rakhine State, especially Maungtau township where major conflicts erupted in August 2017 and visited a reception site and transit camp for refugees. The Advisory Board also had a meeting on 25 January which led to our preliminary advice as contained in the Press Release on 25 January.

“One of the big challenges in the Rakhine problem is the huge gap in perception and interpretation of the situation there. The problem lies in the fact that different and often conflicting narratives coming from various sources are causing misunderstanding.”

AF: *How do you plan to sustain the cooperation and support from the Myanmar Government while keeping the impartiality and credibility of the Advisory Board in navigating this emotionally charged and deeply polarising issue?*

SURAKIART: I can assure you that the Advisory Board will be objective and unbiased in our approach to the problem. We want to have open and honest conversations with all relevant stakeholders. We believe that we can play



Dr. Surakiart and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi at the Meeting of the Advisory Board to the Committee on the Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State

an important role as a bridge builder helping to narrow the gap in perception of the situation and encouraging the key players to re-engage with each other in a constructive manner. The Chairman and Advisory Board members met regularly with Myanmar's relevant Ministers responsible for Rakhine State, including with the State Counsellor.

AF: *You mentioned that the Advisory Board is not a fact-finding committee, but you also stressed the need to enhance transparency through improved media access. How could the Board tackle the problem of “fake news” and its negative impact on the issue?*

SURAKIART: One of the big challenges in the Rakhine problem is the huge gap in perception and interpretation of the situation there. The problem lies in the fact that different and often conflicting narratives coming from various sources are causing misunderstanding. The Advisory Board is therefore in favour of improving access for the international media so that people can understand what is really happening there and thereby counteract the “fake news.” We are also in favour of and have proposed a national initiative for an investigation commission regarding what has happened since August 2017.

AF: *Is the repatriation plan feasible considering the refugees in Bangladesh are reluctant to return to Myanmar, and the local government in Rakhine seems resistant to the Annan Commission’s recommendations?*

SURAKIART: The lack of progress on repatriation is a cause for concern. Clearly it is an enormous and complex undertaking. There are many difficulties, some of which appear to be technical such as the problem with the verification forms, while others are more complicated such as improving the conditions, especially security, inside Myanmar. We believe this requires the need to draw on the expertise and resources of the UN agencies and the international community. The Implementation Committee has implemented a lot of the recommendations but international dialogue is needed for it to be sustainable.

AF: *The 88 recommendations of the Annan Commission comprise both long-term and immediate-term measures. In the current political landscape of Myanmar, which recommendations need to be prioritised, in your view?*

SURAKIART: After our first meeting in Nay Pyi Taw on 25 January 2018, the Board issued five recommendations which included (i) consultations with all local, regional and national stakeholders in Rakhine State, and with the international community, during the implementation; (ii) inviting UN agencies to involve in the return and resettlement of the displaced persons; (iii) full humanitarian access at the soonest; (iv) establishing an independent fact-finding commission on the situation in Rakhine State after August 2017; and (v) wider media access to all affected areas in Rakhine State.

AF: *The Advisory Board has visited Rakhine State and the transit camps there. What is your assessment of the situation on the ground from the visit? From your vantage point, how does the Rakhine issue look across the border in Bangladesh?*

SURAKIART: The Myanmar Government has made great efforts to prepare for the repatriation. But conditions on the ground can still be improved so that the refugees can have the confidence to return. Some of our staff were recently in Cox's Bazar and saw the very difficult conditions in the camps. This is a continuing cause for concern, especially with the approaching monsoon season. It was also clear that perceptions of the problems with the repatriation process are different on the two sides of the border.

AF: *What are the relevant stakeholders that the Advisory Board has engaged in dialogue or plan to engage in the future? What are your key take-aways from the dialogue with them?*

SURAKIART: The Advisory Board has been engaged in discussions with a wide range of stakeholders, including those in the affected countries, the various groups on the ground, UN agencies and other international organisations and representatives of several Western countries. It is a continuing process. I believe there is goodwill amongst all the parties to try to resolve the problems in Rakhine State. Once again, we see the need to bridge the gap of perceptions among the stakeholders, and we hope to act as sincere and honest brokers in that regard.

AF: *In the final analysis, what would you qualify as “success” for the Advisory Board? Is there any timeframe for the Board?*

SURAKIART: The mandate of the Advisory Board runs for one year and may be renewed for another year. We have to recognise that the situation in Rakhine State is very complicated and will take some time to resolve, far beyond the mandate of the Board. Ultimately, success will lie in the hands of the people and Government of Myanmar.

AF: *The situation in Rakhine State has heightened regional concerns over the threat of extremism and terrorism, which are also being felt in Southern Thailand and Southern Philippines. Will Rakhine turn into another Marawi?*

SURAKIART: So far there is nothing to indicate that the Marawi scenario might be replicated in Rakhine. Nonetheless, we cannot discount the threat of extremism and terrorism and need to remain vigilant at all times. We know from experience in other regions that there are extremist groups that are ready to exploit situations of unrest and despair. It would be in all our interests to work together to ensure that this does not happen in Rakhine.

AF: *You have said that “the international community cannot be helpful if it is not inclusive” when it comes to the situation in Rakhine State. Can you elaborate further on this?*

SURAKIART: The situation in Rakhine State is highly complex and needs to be addressed in all of its various dimensions – political, security, economic development, humanitarian, etc. The expertise and resources of the

international community could make an important contribution to resolving these problems. The Advisory Board has therefore advocated for improving access to Rakhine State for UN agencies, humanitarian INGOs, the press and the diplomatic corps. We all can play a part to make things better, and should be given the opportunity to do so.

AF: *What is your assessment of ASEAN's involvement thus far in helping address the situation in Rakhine State? Do you see any role for ASEAN in implementing the Annan Commission's recommendations? Where would ASEAN's contributions be most helpful and impactful?*

SURAKIART: Reports from the recent ASEAN-Australia Summit in Sydney showed that ASEAN is engaged on the issue of Rakhine. In early April, the Advisory Board is meeting with the Singapore Foreign Minister as the current Chair of ASEAN to discuss what role ASEAN can play. We believe there is room for ASEAN to make a positive contribution, for instance, in the area of public health. Individual ASEAN members have been conducting assistance projects. Perhaps a more consolidated, collective effort by ASEAN would be well-received in Rakhine. There is the idea of implementing a model township project in Rakhine for the integrated and comprehensive development for all communities.

AF: *Given your time-honoured and distinguished career as a diplomat and political leader, what are your best assets that could help you deliver in this important mission?*

SURAKIART: I believe that my ability to reach out to all the stakeholders, to act as a bridge-builder to narrow the gap in perception, and to bring the key players together to work to resolve the situation in Rakhine State in a discreet and non-judgmental manner, are best assets for this particular mission. In short, these are the essence of the ASEAN Way. ☸

Dr. Surakiart Sathirathai is Chairman of the Asian Peace and Reconciliation Council (APRC), and the Chairman of the Advisory Board to the Committee on the Implementation of the Recommendations on Rakhine State. He was Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister overseeing Foreign Affairs, Education and Culture (March 2005-September 2006), Minister of Foreign Affairs (February 2001-March 2005), and Minister of Finance (1995-1996). Dr Surakiart has held many chairmanship positions in the business sector, universities, and charitable organisations in Thailand and abroad. He was also Advisor to the Truth for Reconciliation Commission of Thailand (September 2011-July 2012).

Between the Shadow and the Soul: Puppetry Arts in ASEAN

Cheryl Teh explores the wonderful world of puppetry arts across the region.

Night has fallen upon a small theatre in Indonesia, and an audience composed of locals and tourists has gathered around the stage. When music fills the air, the faint, excited whispers hush, all at once, in anticipation of a night to remember. The visitors are here to view a wayang kulit (Indonesian for shadow puppetry) show, a well-loved popular art form across the region.

Wayang kulit, also known as ‘shadow play’, is an ancient form of storytelling passed down from generation to generation. The performance includes several important components. First, a kelir, or stretched linen canvas, divides the dalang (puppeteer) and his spectators. A gedebog (Javanese for banana trunk) is placed on the ground, between the screen and the puppeteer, and the figures are held in place there. Then, a light source (previously a coconut-oil lamp, now replaced with electric lights) casts shadows onto the screen.

For each wayang kulit performance in Indonesia and Malaysia, large sets of puppets are used, numbering as many as 200 to 300. It takes approximately three weeks to create a puppet; including a painstaking process of curing and stretching tree bark, chiseling and carving the puppet, then painting it according to stylised designs. Puppets representing important characters, such as gods and holy men, are considered sacred, kept carefully in a specially woven cloth, and provided with flower offerings.

During a performance, flat cut-out puppets are held between a light source and a translucent screen. In Javanese wayang kulit performances, the puppet master is mostly accompanied by a gamelan orchestra, sometimes with singers. The puppeteer then uses intricate sweeping moves to bring these intricately carved figures to life. The banana trunk on the ground symbolises the earth, and the canvas, the sky; together, they symbolise the entire cosmos.

Wayang kulit performances usually tell tales from two Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and contextualise these stories so that they are of relevance to the community. The shadow puppet theatre represents not only a deep cultural tradition, but the maintenance of hierarchy and equilibrium. The stories told on stage signify not only the workings of the universe but also the struggles between good and evil, and the mankind’s endeavours to achieve a balance between the two. Hence, when the dalang moves the puppet figures across the screen, it is believed that the divine forces guide his hands as the figures appear to

walk, dance and laugh. So strong is this belief that when marionette artists in Myanmar wish to express praise for a fellow player, they deem him ‘possessed by the Lamaing spirit’ - the Buddhist patron spirit of theatre who could fill an artist with unbounded inspiration.

There are different variations of shadow puppetry in each ASEAN member state. The southern part of Laos, particularly in Champasack province, is home to many shadow puppet performances. Instead of tree bark, Laotian puppets are created from hard paper or cardboard, and the designs are based on the imagination of their producers rather than traditional conventions. Meanwhile, Khmer shadow theatre in Cambodia uses leather puppets. Khmer shadow theatre holds much similarity to Thailand’s shadow play called Nang Yai (where puppets of varying sizes are made out of buffalo hide, and performances are narrated by music, chants and songs.) As for Singapore, the traditional wayang kulit, based on epics and timeless stories, were given a ‘modern and Westernised’ twist at the 2017 Aliwal Arts Night Crawl. Puppets were inspired by contemporary heroes like Iron Man and The Incredible Hulk, and were decked out in hip street styles like sneakers





Star Wars inspired puppets show in Penang

Macam Macam ASEAN

and skateboards. However, the puppets were crafted with the same traditional materials of buffalo skin, and retained the silhouettes of the wayang kulit puppets of yesteryear. The resilience of wayang kulit and its enchanting appeal have lasted through the ages.

Unlike the shadow puppets seen in other parts of the region, Vietnamese water puppetry is a unique variation of puppetry arts. In Vietnam, the art of making lacquered wooden puppets dance on water dates back to the 11th century, where villagers found much amusement in puppet shows held at rice paddy fields. Puppeteers stood, waist-deep, in the water that acted both as the stage for the puppets and also as a symbolic link to the rice harvest. In the modern day, water puppetry performances take place either on traditional ponds in villages, or a specially constructed pool stage. The puppets are then brought to life by up to 8 puppeteers using slim bamboo poles and a seamless string mechanism concealed below the water's surface. To this day, this art form is still much enjoyed, as colourful flags and spotlights adorn the stage, creating a festive atmosphere.

Meanwhile, in the Philippines, the puppetry arts are kept alive through Teatrang Mulat Theatre, not only as a form of entertainment but a means for social education and outreach. For these performances, the puppets are brightly coloured, made out of plastic, and painted with acrylic paints. Yet, the influences of Indonesia's wayang kulit are very prominent in these productions. The puppets are mostly patterned after



Water Puppets in Hanoi

Pinterest



Wayang Kulit puppets being painted

NatharlaneTravel

the wayang golek, or rod puppet, which is moved about via the rods attached to its limbs. However, the puppeteers of Teatrang Mulat have modified their puppets according to their individual characters and physical features, allowing for much more freedom in design and creativity. The puppets of Teatrang Mulat have reached out to children living in disaster areas, for example in northern Luzon in 1990, bringing joy to them during challenging times.

The puppetry arts exist today not only as a continuation of past traditions and a cultural delicacy for visitors to the region, but also a resilient and versatile art form that should be preserved. In May 2016, around 20 puppet artists and musicians from Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore and Vietnam gathered for a week-long workshop to create APEX-Earth, a collaborative stage leading up to the 'One ASEAN' puppet show and tour in 2017 to celebrate ASEAN's 50th Anniversary. Puppetry arts hence represent the rich heritage of Southeast Asian nations, and a platform for their bonding, cultural exchange and creative collaboration. And so the legends live on – not only in the shadows, but in the soul of Southeast Asia – when the night falls, the lights turn on and the puppets are brought to life. 🎭

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Wayang Kulit performance in Singapore

Malay Heritage Centre



Myanmar Traditional Puppets

Gonyanmartours

Koh Rong: A Glowing Gem



Nur Aziemah Aziz brings us to Koh Rong, Cambodia's island jewel.

The tourism industry of Cambodia has been synonymous with the city of Siem Reap and UNESCO World Heritage Site Angkor Wat which have held great charm for tourists all over the world. However, in recent years, Koh Rong has risen to prominence as one of the must-see places for visitors to the country, even competing with the oft-hyped islands of Koh Samui, Koh Pha Ngan and Maya Bay in Thailand. One must venture off the beaten track to explore this lovely tourist destination – a true, untainted gem of Cambodia.

Koh Rong is Cambodia's second largest island, located off the coast of Sihanoukville, on the Gulf of Thailand. The word Rong (រុង) is said to refer to an old term for 'cave', but some islanders refer to the Khmer word for 'shelter.' It is fitting then that Koh Rong, with its scenic panoramic views of lush hills and iridescent waters, has become a welcome 'shelter' for many.

Connectivity to Koh Rong has been improved lately, with the fast development of ferry services to meet the growing number of visitors to the island. Previously, it took approximately two and a half hours to get to the island via

the slow boat. Today, visitors have the option of hopping on the speed ferry to Koh Rong in less than one hour from the Serendipity pier in Sihanoukville. This speed ferry is decked out with comfortable chairs and cool drinks, so one may truly sit back, relax, and enjoy the sea breeze on their way to the island paradise.

When one arrives on Koh Rong, the first must-see attraction is its picture-perfect shoreline. The shore of Koh Rong is 43 kilometres long, and covers 28 picture-perfect, pristine white beaches. Strolling along the coast, one would have relaxing moments with the waves tickling their feet, the soft sand between their toes and turquoise waters lapping on the shore. Those who fall in love with the sea may embark on diving and snorkeling trips to explore the majestic underwater world of the island. Nothing is more unforgettable than an exploration of Koh Rong's sapphire waters - and a visit to the lovely sea creatures that reside just beneath the surface. Dive sites like Khmer Garden (a vast and stunning site, home to schools of Barracuda Gary and Yellow Box Fish) and Buddha Reef (a good site for spotting the blue-ringed angel fish) are very popular.



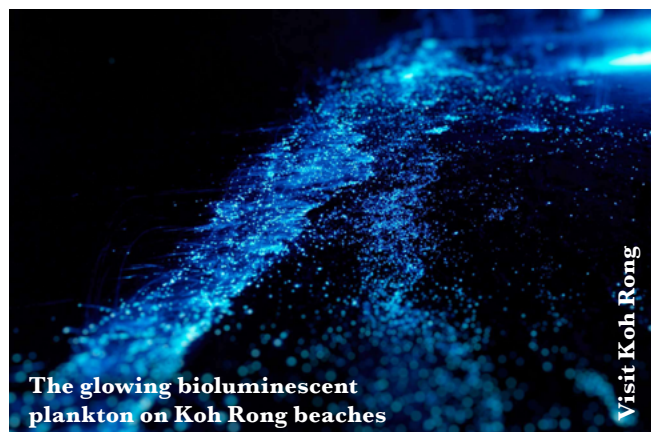


The wonders of Koh Rong do not end here. Inland, Koh Rong offers untouched wilderness in thick forested areas, home to myriad native animals from birds to reptiles. Adventure seekers might embark on an exciting trekking trip through Koh Rong's rainforest, guided by the island's expert tour guides. Under the jungle's lush canopy, one may stroll in the shade of towering mahogany trees, while keeping a close eye out for macaws, toucans, kingfishers, and a great variety of insects.

As the sunset paints the sky hues of gold and orange, Koh Rong's night sky becomes a canvas for magical night views that have captivated and enthralled many travellers. Some look towards the deluge of stars scattered like diamonds in the night sky. Others may cast their gaze to the glimmering waters of the island. Koh Rong's waters are filled with bioluminescent plankton that glow in the dark, shining ever so brilliantly. Tours to view the glowing plankton up close are readily available. But one may choose to view the beach from the comfort of their resorts, simply to marvel at the wonders of nature at the end of a fun-filled day.

Even for those less inclined to venture into the great unknown, Koh Rong offers a short respite from the life of a busy city dweller. Despite being considered as one of the more developed islands in Cambodia, holidaying in Koh Rong remains devoid of conveniences like e-payments, convenience stores, franchise restaurants or supermarkets. Though the absence of these amenities, especially the lack of a steady internet connection, might irk the modern traveller, the minimalist island life allows them to truly enjoy the nature's offerings. Indulging in the beauty of the island is a pleasant escape from the trappings of a constantly connected life – a much-needed digital detox for an exhausted soul desiring to get off the grid and recalibrate.

Koh Rong has experienced a tourist boom in recent years, as more visitors come to explore and discover this hidden gem of Cambodia. Parts of the island are now hosts to tourists, ranging from low-cost accommodation for backpackers to upscale private resorts and five-star hotels. More developments are beginning to take place and transform



the island. Yet, the charm of Koh Rong lies in the balance between its touristy aspects and the careful preservation of the island's forests and diving areas. There are beaches filled with party lovers and music but other parts of Koh Rong still offer a quiet refuge for travelers who prefer the solace of the nature's tranquility and serenity. As Cambodia's hidden gem is unveiled to more and more people, it is important that its pristine beauty be preserved so that it continues to be a shelter for travelers from the weary world. 🌿

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Asian Elephant



Numbers remaining in the wild:
40,000 – 50,000

Found in Cambodia, Indonesia,
Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar,
Thailand, and Vietnam

Asian elephants are the continent's largest terrestrial mammals. They can reach 6.4m in length and 3m at the shoulder, and weigh as much as 5 tonnes. Their skin ranges from dark grey to brown, with patches of pink on the forehead, the ears, the base of the trunk and the chest. More than 100,000 Asian elephants may have existed at the start of the 20th century, but numbers have fallen by at least 50% over the last three generations, and they are still in decline today. The Asian elephant is on the Endangered list of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). *(Source: WWF)*