

AN ASEAN COMMUNITY BY 2015?

by Rodolfo C. Severino

There is some scepticism, even a great deal of it, in a number of quarters about the ability of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to achieve its proclaimed goal of an ASEAN Community by 2015.

This scepticism is misplaced, based as it is on a misunderstanding of the ASEAN Community concept and its target-year of 2015. It is, more broadly, based on a misconception of how ASEAN has operated since its founding in 1967. These days, the scepticism often arises from the connection made with the headline-friendly events of the day – the Cambodia-Thailand conflict and Myanmar's proclaimed desire to assume ASEAN's chairmanship in 2014.

First of all, as ASEAN Secretary-General Surin Pitsuwan has been quoted as pointing out, 2015 is not "an absolute cut-off date". It is just a "target-date", not an "end-date", a "work in progress". One might add that the ASEAN Community 2015 is an aspiration, rather than a hard-and-fast target. Even the European Union, which proclaimed it to be a community decades ago, does not pretend to be anything but a work in progress.

If one looks closely at the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community: 2009-2015, published by the ASEAN Secretariat, one will notice that all three "pillars" of the Community, political/security, economic and socio-cultural, are full of words like "promote", "encourage", "enhance", and "work towards". These are clearly aspirational expressions rather than the setting of targets. There are also agreements on collective action or references to past ones. Most of these have been done or are being done. But nobody should be under any illusion that in 2015 a full-blown ASEAN Community will emerge upon the international scene. Indeed, Indonesia, as ASEAN's current chair, is trying to get ASEAN to look beyond 2015 in terms of ASEAN's progress.

In 2015, it may be time to take stock and make an honest assessment of the progress that ASEAN has made in its work towards stronger political cohesion, deeper economic

integration and more effective regional cooperation on regional problems. But to guess at what precisely is going to happen on the basis of current or projected events would, at best, be speculation.

Perhaps, the one exception where judgments can be made now is the economic component of the ASEAN Community, simply because the Roadmap for that pillar contains specific measures and precise commitments, many of them to be carried out by a certain date. To be sure, the ASEAN Secretariat publishes a scorecard that tracks the implementation of these measures and commitments, but the scorecard contains mainly data on the ratification of agreements or the formation of bodies. Any indication of implementation or effectiveness is omitted, at least in the published version.

This is not to say that the Roadmap is useless because the scorecard is substantially confidential. Discussions among leaders and ministers, although behind closed doors, can serve to prod compliance with agreements. But failing to implement or carry out all the economic measures by 2015 should not be construed as a failure of the entire Community-building enterprise.

Finally, most of the commitments in the Roadmap for an ASEAN Community are designed to be carried out by each member-state in accordance with its system and laws and within the political constraints tying the hands of its leaders.

Judging ASEAN is an exercise in sophistication, not a facile endeavour of finding fault with a 44-year-old regional association of sovereign states.

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