

**Indonesia Wants to Lead, but will the Rest of ASEAN Follow?**  
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Indonesia is enthusiastic about using its current chairmanship of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to prioritise human rights issues and the protection of migrant workers. Indonesia has already pledged to increase the efficiency of the ASEAN Inter-governmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) in fulfilling its mandate of respecting the basic rights of human beings.

Vietnam's chairmanship of ASEAN came to an end last year. Under the Vietnamese leadership, human rights issues were swept under the carpet. Hanoi's behaviour was understandable. The country is still ruled by the Vietnamese Communist Party. There have been known cases of human rights violations in Vietnam. Thus, talking about protecting human rights could be very embarrassing and indeed reveal vulnerability on the part of the Vietnamese government.

But Vietnam was lucky to have Thai support. As two Vietnamese activists planned to give a presentation on Vietnam's human rights situation at the invitation of the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand (FCCT) in September 2010, the Thai Foreign Ministry refused to grant them visas and compelled the FCCT to call off the event. As usual, the Foreign Ministry explained its decision in flowery diplomatic language.

It said: "Thailand's policy is to maintain friendly relations with other countries and [it is] also our long-standing principled position not to allow any individual or group to use Thai territory for any activities that would be detrimental to, or undermine the integrity of, other countries."

This incident confirmed certain realities in ASEAN: human rights cannot be protected by lip service alone. Thus, as Indonesia vows to make human rights its top priority, observers are now waiting to see if the new chair can turn ASEAN rhetoric into action.

Indonesia has traditionally been perceived as the "natural leader" of ASEAN. In recent years, it has emerged as a born-again democratic country. After long, tumultuous years of dictatorship and political crisis, Indonesia has transformed itself into a champion of democracy.

However, development in ASEAN as a whole has progressed at a much slower pace, certainly in the area of democratisation and human rights protection. The uneven gap in development between ASEAN and Indonesia has left leaders in Jakarta frustrated. Many members of the Indonesian parliament and leading think tanks have gone as far as recommending that Indonesia should adopt a post-ASEAN foreign policy.

In other words, ASEAN should no longer be treated as the only cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy. For Indonesia, ASEAN should constitute only one of the available platforms through which the country can attain and fulfil its national interests. This recommendation reflects a great sense of exasperation in Indonesia about the lack of real progress in ASEAN.

For President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, the task here is not only to prove ASEAN critics wrong, but also to demonstrate that ASEAN is serious about its community building and recognises the necessity to discuss even the most contentious issues like democracy and human rights. Indonesia's foreign minister, Dr Marty Natalegawa, said last week that human rights protection represented an area in which Jakarta was keen to see improvements. Can it be done?

It would be naive to believe that promoting human rights in ASEAN is an easy mission. But is it true that respect for human rights is something so unnatural to the minds of some ASEAN leaders?

Perhaps the report from watchdog group Freedom House, released earlier this month, can provide an answer to the above question. According to the report, Burma is one of the 47 countries that received the survey's lowest rating for both political rights and civil liberties. Meanwhile, Thailand and Cambodia are among 25 countries listed as declining in their levels of freedom.

This is unsurprising in the case of Burma, which is ruled by one of the world's most repressive regimes. But in the Thai and Cambodian cases, human rights violations have been committed even when the respective governments have openly claimed to be defenders of democracy.

Indonesia's mission to promote human rights, albeit highly commendable, may create rifts and divisions between those who support such a contentious agenda and those who regard the treatment, or in fact the maltreatment, of their citizens as strictly an internal matter.

If Jakarta wants ASEAN to get serious about human rights, it will need to convince member states to abandon the absurd principle of non-interference. It is now time for ASEAN to talk about some sort of punishment in the event that a member state fails to comply with certain rules and regulations designed to protect human rights.

Since its launch in 2009, the AICHR has been criticised for lacking enforceable authority. ASEAN apologists have defended the powerless commission by saying that the AICHR has been tasked to promote the awareness of human rights protection, rather than to police and prosecute the violators of human rights.

Can Indonesia redefine the duties and responsibilities of the AICHR? Will other notorious human rights violators in ASEAN agree with Indonesia's move? Time will tell. Indonesia has twelve months to show that it is capable of turning ASEAN into a truly caring society for its own citizens.

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