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A Soul for ASEAN

By Ooi Kee Beng

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With the public release of the epochal ASEAN Charter at the ASEAN Summit in Singapore in November, the development of regionalism in Southeast Asia suddenly looks more structured, and its future somewhat brighter.

What needs work now are the areas of integration.

As we all know, the impetus for the formation of ASEAN in 1967 was the issue of security. The confrontation between Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and the Philippines over the formation of Malaysia had finally ended, to the relief of all the countries involved. The concern of leaders of the time was how further conflicts could be avoided.

At that time, the war in Vietnam was still raging with no end in sight, and with the potential to spill southwards. For ASEAN's founding nations in the maritime south, the fight against communist guerillas came to provide the platform for cooperation.

With the end of the Cold War, poignantly symbolised by the entry of Vietnam into ASEAN in 1995, the security focus shifted from sovereignty to concrete matters like piracy, smuggling, terrorism, illegal migration and epidemics. Of course, border controversies continue to exist, but with the increasing resort to international arbitration, these are bound to become less and less of a problem.

Today, what drives regional integration is economics. When ideology no longer separates nations and divides citizens from each other, major countries in the neighbourhood, especially China and India, have gotten their act together. This is starkly represented in the mind-boggling speed of development that Asia has seen since the 1990s.

Now that Asia's tiger economies have recovered from the 1997 financial crisis, nothing seems to stand in the way of continued regional growth, except perhaps an apparent

faltering American economy, oil prices and the ecology. All that, and of course the incomprehension of ASEAN's peoples of the need for regionalism.

With that said, economic cooperation is nevertheless the order of the day, and optimism is the meal of the day. Faced with competition from giant Asian economies, ASEAN is speeding up its process of integration in order to retain agency in its own development.

Of the three designated areas of ASEAN integration, therefore, those of security and of economics do not seem to be in need of much motivation and encouragement. The immediacy of the need to cooperate and integrate is obvious enough to powerful politicians, generals, civil servants, scholars and businessmen. Had this not been so, the ASEAN Charter would probably not have appeared for another 40 years.

Socio-cultural integration, on the other hand, is a slow affair that requires broad participation and inter-cultural dialogues. The benefits of this area of integration are not at all clear to most people in the region.

What takes place instead is endless lobbying by non-governmental organisations to get the powerful to not forget human values in their rush towards corporate profit and national integrity.

However, the conduits through which NGO voices reach the powers that be have never been free-flowing. Blockages and dismissals are more the rule than the exception, and the nationalistic – and, let us admit it, self-serving – agendas of governments have tended to limit ASEAN's vision and potential.

As things are, ASEAN's integration runs the risk of happening in a badly skewed manner. It is not easy to perceive of these three areas of integration in any unified manner.

The reason is simple. As yet, ASEAN has a body, but no soul. The Charter is but a piece of paper in need of a breath of life. Now, how does a community gain a soul, and how do its peoples become enthused by the bloc's existence?

The following may sound paradoxical, but it seems to me that in an age when Southeast Asia is ruled largely by illiberal democracies and dictatorships, democratic ideals and people power can be more effectively pumped into the workings of ASEAN through the creation of a *permanent* Eminent Persons Group.

Such a esteemed group – one member from each of the ten countries – can bypass national authority and governmental censorship and speak as moral individuals. They can argue as Southeast Asians. Whatever practical and practicable Asian values we may be proud of can be properly expressed by such a selection of Grey Eminences. If we are lucky, some of these men and women will rise to the occasion and act wisely and say wise words that envisage ASEAN integration as a wholesome affair, and not a hotchpotch of selfish compromises.

Their only power will be their moral reputation, unsupported by legislative curbs.

Chances for the transnational values that many NGOs promulgate to become common sense are better if individuals respected for their statesmanship and who cannot be totally ignored by their home governments are allowed to voice their views on regional policies to the region's audience. They would know that they cannot be seen to be too nationalistic, and by virtue of their moral position, they are pressured to promulgate humanistic values.

The bottom line is, souls have faces. ASEAN needs a face that its peoples can be proud of, a face that mirrors their moral and social aspirations so often overshadowed by crass priorities of economics and strategics. A permanent EPG has the potential to provide that, and to symbolise ASEAN unity, and to guarantee the integrity of the organisation.

Socio-cultural integration in the region will seriously occur only if it is morally attractive and culturally "cool" to become Southeast Asians. As a group and as individuals, grey eminences handpicked by ASEAN's governments and respected by ASEAN's peoples have good prospects for influencing these governments and acting in ways that endear them to these peoples.

The writer is a Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies. He is the author of *The Reluctant Politician: Tun Dr Ismail and His Time* (ISEAS 2006).