

PERSPECTIVE

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CURRENT EVENTS

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A Strong Secretariat, a Strong ASEAN? A Re-evaluation

By Deepak Nair¹

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- “Strengthening the Secretariat” has been a recurrent entreaty and aspiration in ASEAN’s diplomatic history. However, since the failure of ASEAN’s foreign ministers to issue a joint communiqué in 2012, some commentators have increasingly tied the prospects of ASEAN’s cohesion and centrality in Asian security to the status of its Secretariat in Jakarta.
- The discourse on “strengthening the Secretariat” is configured around two axes. First, that the Secretariat has always been ‘weak’ and ‘powerless’. Second, that a Secretariat of the future designed along rational-legal lines will necessarily be ‘strong’ and ‘powerful’. This paper problematizes both these assumptions.
- It does so by foregrounding an obscure history of Secretariat starting from its ‘professionalisation’ in 1992 following the end of the Cold War to its contemporary station in the shadow of the 2008 ASEAN Charter.
- The Secretariat’s history discloses a perennial tussle between two models of how its bureaucracy may be fashioned: a rational-legal bureaucracy that asserts itself as a locus of power, and a patrimonial bureaucracy that enjoys power by harnessing, channeling, and borrowing the power of states firmly in the *backstage* of diplomacy.

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- This paper recounts the fate of both these models in the Secretariat's everyday and lived experience to argue against the assumption that the Secretariat has always been weak and powerless and that (yet another) 'restructured' Secretariat of the future holds the promise to be 'strong'. 'Strengthening' the Secretariat is eminently desirable given its contemporary predicaments, but its advocates must reckon with what kind of bureaucracy is *permissible* under the aegis of ASEAN's diplomatic practice.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions on ASEAN often focus on sweeping, big picture themes: on ASEAN's role in managing the Great Powers in the Asia-Pacific, or on the institutional, regulatory or indeed discursive reality of the "ASEAN Community" in Southeast Asia. In this paper, I will draw attention to a more ordinary, banal, and obscure site of everyday 'ASEAN' activity. This site is the four decades old ASEAN Secretariat in South Jakarta staffed by nearly 300 officers from across Southeast Asia which runs on an annual budget of nearly US\$20 million. Importantly, the Secretariat is the only bureaucratic organ to physically attend, coordinate, and memorialise the expanding array of meetings and activities through which a ritually and lexically coherent ASEAN is produced. Studying a banal site of everyday activity can generate insights of a more fundamental kind about ASEAN's diplomacy because it is in such spaces that the long-standing anxieties, habits, and dispositions of ASEAN's member states are found in their most sedimented form. Moreover, it is *precisely* in such everyday spaces that claims to reform and change in ASEAN's diplomatic practice must be ultimately located, prescribed, and tested.

THE CLAMOUR FOR "STRENGTHENING" THE ASEAN SECRETARIAT

There is also a policy-relevant basis for studying the Secretariat given the recent clamour in newspaper op-eds, consultant and think tank reports, and ASEAN-themed seminars and workshops about ASEAN's need for strong institutions, and specifically a strong Secretariat at its centre. This call was perhaps most voluble following the failure of ASEAN's foreign ministers to issue a joint communiqué at the end of their annual meeting in 2012, a first in ASEAN's diplomatic history. In an account that has been reported and analysed in much detail, the breakdown resulted when Cambodia, the rotating ASEAN Chair for the year, was perceived to side with China by blocking the inclusion of any references to the disputes in the South China Sea in the joint communiqué. Eventually, it was left to the energy of the Indonesian foreign minister Marty Natalegawa to undertake a round of "shuttle diplomacy" and have a "six-point" statement issued belatedly. The apparent success of a foreign power in successfully projecting its interests into ASEAN's familial core of foreign ministers, and thwart its performance of functional diplomatic kinship, provoked a slew of commentary analysing the implications of this rupture on ASEAN's "cohesion" and, by implication, its prerogative claim to "centrality" in managing Asian security.

Sprouting forth from this din of prognoses and prescriptions, however, were a set of pointed questions about the Association's Secretariat in Jakarta. Journalists asked why Secretariat staff had not been allowed to mediate given their "expertise and institutional knowledge" and their "impartial watch over ASEAN's interests".² Prominent scholars of ASEAN argued that the disorder at Phnom Penh was a "wake up call" to "strengthen the ASEAN

² Kavi Chongkittavorn (2012) "Asean's new challenge, strengthening secretariat," *The Nation*, July 23.

Secretariat”³ and that an “institutional solution” to the flaws of the “ASEAN Way of leadership” which favoured the whims and caprices of its rotating Chair country “would involve upgrading the ASEAN Secretariat, enlarging its budget and authorising its secretary general to be less of a secretary and more of a general”.⁴ International think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations chipped in as well, arguing that in order to be seen as a “neutral broker” in the company of Great Powers in East Asia, ASEAN would have to “transform itself”, notably, by “seriously revamping its Secretariat” into a “powerful and knowledgeable body” and by “empowering a high profile secretary general to speak for ASEAN”.⁵ Reflecting on his five frustrated years at the Secretariat in his swansong report to ASEAN’s foreign ministers, the outgoing Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan argued that with the intensification of Great Power rivalries in Asia, ASEAN needs to strengthen its solidarity by strengthening the Secretariat as the “heart of ASEAN’s organs”.⁶ The call continues unabated: in a recent lecture, the distinguished lawyer and diplomat Walter Woon argued that without a “strong legal culture at the centre of the Secretariat... ASEAN will function like it always has, driven by pragmatism and realpolitik”.⁷ As this sample suggests, the cohesion and prospects of ASEAN’s diplomatic project has been increasingly tied to the fate of its seven-storied Secretariat in Jakarta.

There are two underlying assumptions in this discourse. First, that the Secretariat has been historically weak and powerless. Second, that a Secretariat endowed with an expansive mandate, bigger budget, and staff offering policy advice rather than merely preparing meetings, will make for a powerful Secretariat. I will argue that both these assumptions about a *powerless* secretariat in the past, and a potentially *powerful* Secretariat of the future can be turned on their head.

A FORGOTTEN HISTORY: THE PROFESSIONAL “RESTRUCTURED” SECRETARIAT OF 1992

To do so, I will foreground a little known history of the Secretariat back in 1992, when a wider and exigent international context described by the end of the Cold War, anxieties about the diversion of FDI to a rapidly growing China, and the strategic uncertainty arising from partial US withdrawal from the region had spurred that familiar cry for ‘strengthening ASEAN’.⁸ ASEAN’s political and diplomatic elites responded to these uncertainties by

³ Amitav Acharya, (2012) “The End of ASEAN Centrality?” *AsiaTimesOnline*, 8 August.

⁴ Donald Emmerson (2012) “Indonesia saves ASEAN’s face,” *Asia Times Online*, 24 July 2012.

⁵ Joshua Kurlantzick, (2012) “ASEAN’s Future and Asian Integration,” *Council On Foreign Relations*. IIGG Working Paper.

⁶ Surin Pitsuwan. (2011), *ASEAN’s Challenge: Some Reflections and Recommendations on Strengthening the ASEAN Secretariat*, (ASEAN Secretariat, Jakarta), p. 5-7.

⁷ Toh Ee Ming, “ASEAN must move from its ‘ad hoc’ ways and develop a legal culture: Walter Woon,” *Today* (online) 14 November 2015.

⁸ On these uncertainties and their response by ASEAN’s elites, see Khong Yuen Foong (2004) ‘Coping with Strategic Uncertainty: Institutions and Soft Balancing in ASEAN’s Post-Cold War Strategy,’ in P. Katzenstein, A. Carson and JJ. Suh (eds) *Rethinking Security in East Asia*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 176-190.

proposing the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) to spur economic growth in their countries and created the ASEAN Regional Forum to keep the US committed in Asia and China restrained through multilateral diplomacy. To coordinate these arrangements, especially the AFTA, they undertook a comprehensive restructuring of the ASEAN Secretariat by accepting the recommendations of a UNDP-funded five-member ‘Panel of Eminent Persons’ led by the former Malaysian Foreign Minister Ghazali Shafie.⁹

Hitherto the Secretariat had been designed as a modest ‘post-office’. It was headed by a Secretary General *of the ASEAN Secretariat* nominated by member states and appointed by foreign ministers for a term of three years. The Secretary General was assisted by seven staff members *seconded* by member states on alphabetical rotation for a non-renewable three-year term.

In 1992, the Secretary General – who was effectively the chief administrative officer of the precincts of a compound in South Jakarta – was now designated as the “Secretary General *of ASEAN*”. The SG’s tenure was raised from three to five years, could be *renewed* for a second term, and was endowed with ministerial rank. In terms of mandate, in a detailed list spanning 14 points and 17 sub-clauses under the heading of “power and functions of the SG”, the office of the SG – and through him or her, the staff of the Secretariat – were now invested with the power to “initiate, advise, coordinate and implement ASEAN’s activities.”¹⁰

What gave this restructuring substance was the termination of secondments and the opening up of *all* offices below that of the Secretary General to “open recruitment”, which meant that positions were now advertised through a process of public announcement in the member states and were open to all qualified citizens from member states.¹¹

With US dollar salaries pegged to UN pay scales of the day, and endowed with diplomatic immunities and privileges, a diverse cohort of professionals such as journalists, development consultants, think tank researchers, former UN officers, and ex-government officers now entered the Secretariat. This cohort came with a predictable sociological biography. All staff possessed *linguistic capital* in their facility with the English language – ASEAN’s “official working language”¹² and *lingua franca* enabling conversations, relationships and activities spanning the ASEAN field in a region otherwise described by

⁹ Other members of this panel included Dr. Noordin Sopiee who was then Chief Executive of the prominent Malaysian think tank ISIS; the influential Indonesian economist Mohammad Sadli who was a member of the ‘Berkeley Mafia’ in New Order Indonesia; Jacques Pelkmans, a Brussels-based Dutch scholar on European integration; and G.E. Mills a Jamaican academic in the University of West Indies with an expertise in public administration. The restructuring was declared at the Singapore Summit in January 1992 and fleshed out in a Protocol adopted by foreign ministers in July 1992. All changes came into effect in 1993.

¹⁰ ASEAN, (1992) *Protocol Amending the Agreement on the Establishment of the ASEAN Secretariat*, Manila, Philippines.

¹¹ With the stipulation that there would be an equitable representation of nationalities among staff.

¹² Article 34 in the 2008 ASEAN Charter.

diverse linguistic markets of national and regional languages. The possession of such linguistic capital was suggestive of the dominant positions they occupied across other social fields. Thus several staff enjoyed *social capital* in the form of elite diplomatic, political, military, and bureaucratic family backgrounds, and most possessed *cultural capital* in the form of graduate degrees from mostly European and American universities and liberal arts colleges – Carnegie-Mellon, Wisconsin-Madison, Brandies, New Orleans, Oxford, Kent, Columbia, among others.

This stock of capital at the Secretariat in the early 1990s was generative of a distinct cosmopolitan habitus structured around the common referents of language, university education, travel experiences, and class-shaped modes of sociabilities (most notably, after-work drinks and gatherings at upmarket bars and international clubs in Jakarta). These assets were important insofar as they constituted a necessary – even if not sufficient – base along which a strong *esprit de corps* among these ‘pioneer batch’ emerged during these years. More importantly, it gave them an embodied ease in interacting and mingling with ASEAN’s diplomats and bureaucrats as well as a stake in enriching their own cache of social capital.

Thus, with the entry of openly recruited professionals governed by clauses on loyalty, political neutrality and impartiality drawn verbatim from the Staff Regulations of the League of Nations and the UN Charter, the Secretariat in Jakarta was being organised around the principles of an Euro-American international civil service that had been formulated and fine-tuned over the 20th century.

However, with the possibilities of a professionalized secretariat unfolding in unanticipated ways, state reaction soon set in, and this was prosecuted above all in the intimacy of routine face-to-face interactions and embodied encounters between the state and the secretariat. Take Ajit Singh, for instance, the first Secretary General of ASEAN, who was endowed with the rank of Minister and the mandate to “initiate and advise” member states. His attempts to accomplish this elevated rank and mandate in embodied interactions were, however, shot down by lesser-ranked ambassador level Director Generals at ASEAN meetings. As veterans recount, member states “came back with a stick” to remind him that “they were sovereign countries”.¹³ Similar experiences were registered by staff in their routine interactions with states, an experience coloured in no small part by the paradox of rich servants serving poor bosses, and the resulting resentment towards staff enjoying jobs that many state agents too had coveted and unsuccessfully applied for.

THE RISE OF EMPOWERED ‘SERVANTS’ AT THE SECRETARIAT

Grappling with state reaction in routine embodied interactions, staff soon surrendered to a process of self-formation whereby they came to perform and rationalize their position as ‘servants’ to member states. To be a good ‘servant’ meant embodying the prerogatives,

¹³ Interview, Jakarta, November 2012.

habits, and disposition of states into second nature. This involved fashioning a way of talking (“don’t contradict”, “don’t argue”, “don’t put member states on the spot”); a way of writing (“don’t name or single out member states’ in meeting reports”); a way of presenting themselves in their everyday interactions with the requisite extension of ritual etiquette and deference; and a way of rationalising their subordination with a universe of folk sayings (“we are servants”, “don’t lower your standards but lower your expectations”).

In other words, staff suffused their varied administrative labour of servicing state agents with what sociologist Arlie Hochschild called as “emotional labour” or labour where one must induce or suppress feeling in order to produce the desired outward countenance in others.¹⁴ Hochschild explicated this form of labour by studying flight attendants in the United States whose well trained and induced smiles were symbolic of the company’s own disposition – that its planes will not crash, that they will depart and arrive on time, that the travelers’ status will be elevated.

Just as the competent flight attendant smiles, the competent secretariat staff must save and maintain the states’ ‘face’ by engaging in what sociologist Erving Goffman referred to as the everyday practices of “face-work”.¹⁵ They must deploy an attentive solicitousness to ensure that ASEAN’s representatives on the meeting table are not threatened with embarrassment and moments of awkwardness by which they may “lose face”, be “out of face” or “shamefaced”, especially as they perform the myth of being sovereign *equals* among each other, as well as seek recognition from representatives of great and major powers in routine interactions. Staffs’ emotional labour may be willingly rendered but may occasionally be coercively extracted by states to buffer their power plays, deflect criticism, and register displeasure without antagonizing each other by assigning some blame on the Secretariat. As one Secretariat veteran piquantly put it: “One third of our work is actual, another third is to save face, and the rest is to be a punching face and scapegoat.”¹⁶

This yielding ‘servant’, however, was not necessarily vapid, unimaginative and ‘powerless’. Staff with high linguistic, cultural and social capital assiduously performed the script of being servants to states, but they did not necessarily see themselves as *inferior* to the state representatives they served. By serving states as faithful and meticulous servants, staff were able to disarm state representatives, win their trust, and carve out capacity in running and steering meetings. This was an *art* of servicing, where staff with a tacit knowledge of ‘shining without outshining states’ deployed a host of strategies in their favour often with the blessings of a proactive Secretary General. These practices included “whispering” to the Chair seated to their left, cultivating state patrons who would pursue their suggestions on the meeting table, and building “coalitions of the willing” on projects especially in areas of functional collaboration (and less so in political-security cooperation). Working firmly in the backstage of diplomacy, this was a docile but not powerless secretariat, one that

¹⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild. (1983) *The Managed Heart: The Commercialisation of Human Feeling*, (Berkeley: University of California Press).

¹⁵ Erving Goffman. (1967) *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behaviour*, (New York: Anchor Books).

¹⁶ Author’s fieldnotes, Jakarta, 2013.

brokered conflicting national positions, ‘initiated’ ideas and concepts deemed to carry a regional vision (the original mandate), and sometimes *de facto* chaired ASEAN meetings on behalf of a weak Chair, all *without being seen to do so*. Equally, this was also a responsive Secretariat willing to push back when state displeasure over an assertive staff was conveyed to the Secretary General.

Thus, under a string of career diplomats from Ajit Singh to Rodolfo Severino and especially Ong Keng Yong, the rational-legal bases of the Secretariat’s bureaucracy were suppressed in favour of a patrimonial bureaucracy which, as Max Weber reminds us, depends “upon piety toward a personal lord and master who is defined by ordered tradition”.¹⁷

REINING IN THE PROFESSIONAL SECRETARIAT

Over time, however, the ‘professional’ bases of this patrimonial bureaucracy began to unravel in uncoordinated and unanticipated ways. This occurred under the force of two coeval processes. First, a series of deals were struck by member states to assuage their anxieties and accommodate their demands to sustain their own fragile kinship. For instance, from 1997 onwards, the office of the DSG was turned into a political appointment shared equally by states through alphabetical rotation;¹⁸ the SG’s position was rendered non-renewable in informal practice to avoid any contention among states in taking equal turns;¹⁹ and more significantly, ASEAN’s foreign ministers arrived at an “informal understanding”²⁰ to allow new and poorer members like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam (CLMV) to second staff to the Secretariat because of their “poor human resource capacities”, expressed most clearly in their wanting linguistic ability with English. These secondments started as a one-time arrangement but were continued informally despite the advice of the Secretary General.²¹

Second, the *everyday effects* of longstanding designs features began to corrode the Secretariat too. Indeed, states control a Secretariat not merely by designing it restrictively on paper but by being indifferent to the everyday pathologies of these design features as long as they sustain a broad status quo in favour of state prerogative. Three are worth stating in brief. First, rigid limits to contract extensions meant that ‘pioneer’ staff who had been swiftly promoted based on strong performance paradoxically reached the ceiling of their

¹⁷ Gerth, H. H., and C. Wright Mills. 1978. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 299.

¹⁸ From 1992-1997, the office of DSG was selected by ‘open recruitment’. In 1997, DSG positions were raised to two and both were turned into political appointments.

¹⁹ This change was agreed in practice by ASEAN’s foreign ministers at their July 1997 meeting but it would take until the ASEAN Charter in 2008 for the change to be codified in an official public document.

²⁰ Severino, R. (2006) *Southeast Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community: Insights from the Former ASEAN Secretary-General*. (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies), p. 21.

²¹ As SG Severino put it “while politically convenient, this is a most unsatisfactory arrangement from the point of view of developing an independent, competent and professional secretariat”. *Ibid*, p. 22.

terms at the Secretariat. In less than two decades, most ‘pioneers’ moved on to other organisations, taking with them their institutional memory and hard-won knowledge of the art of servicing. Designed to preclude a permanent bureaucracy, the Secretariat became, and continues to be, a site of chronic job insecurity. Second, the design stipulation to ensure an equitable representation of nationalities at the Secretariat raised perennial problems for the Secretariat’s management in hiring CLMV candidates through the open-recruitment process. A common solution for the Secretariat’s management was to request the CLMV states to “send their best man” from the ministry on leave without pay, thus adding a layer of quasi-secondments to the Secretariat and opening a terrain of contention between “professionals” and those perceived (rightly or wrongly) to be “political guys” with loyalty to national superiors and cohorts.

Third, and perhaps most profoundly, the design principle of equal contributions by member states to the Secretariat’s budget (agreed by consensus) has meant that annual increments have been hostage to what the least willing member could pay. The resulting erosion in the salary structure over two decades would render positions unattractive, result in a growing turnover problem, as well as vacancies unfilled for up to a year if not longer.

The effects of an eroding salary structure have been expressed most directly in the quality of social and cultural capital coursing through the Secretariat. In contrast to the heady days of 1992-1993 when most staff came with American and European educational degrees, staff at the turn of the millennium enjoyed tenuous links to elite networks, and although most carried international educational degrees, these social assets were secured from nearby centres of learning in Singapore, Australia, and New Zealand. By 2009, with the entry of the ASEAN Charter, most new staff hailed from elite and mid-level national universities ranging from Universiti Malaya, Bandung Institute of Technology, University of Indonesia, Chulalongkorn University, Kasetsart University, Technological University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, among others. Staff carrying such local kinds of cultural capital were not necessarily less “professional”. Instead, the significance of such assets has been in shaping the dominant forms of sociabilities at the contemporary Secretariat. The once cosmopolitan gatherings involving staff from varied nationalities have been increasingly supplanted by socializing along more narrowly national lines, thereby undercutting social integration within the Secretariat as well as the sharing of information and strategies on how to cultivate state patrons and draw on mutual networks to perform the art form of servicing. These more local kinds of cultural capital among staff are now supplemented with years – if not decades – of experience of working in national bureaucracies, with some staff arriving directly from the ASEAN desks of their ministries. Thus, besides lower social assets, the once diverse cohort of journalists, development consultants, and ex-UN officers of the ‘pioneer’ batch had given way to mostly ex-government officers at the Secretariat.

That said, not all forms of cultural and social capital have drained out of the Secretariat during these years of denudation and erosion. Three channels of elite entry and circulation have persisted. First, the Secretariat presents an attractive bureaucratic career for a variety of individuals reeling under constrictions and unfavourable alignments with their nationally

coloured bureaucracies. Notable in this regard are the Malaysian staff at the Secretariat who are overwhelmingly Malaysian Chinese and Malaysian Indians. Educated in English-medium schools followed by graduate degrees in Western universities they lacked the linguistic proficiency to crack national civil service examinations conducted in Malay or were disinclined to build careers in its Malay-dominated bureaucracy.²² A second and arguably more robust channel of elite entry at the Secretariat has been from the CLMV countries where foreign ministries have been prone to more heightened forms of elite capture. For CLMV bureaucrats, a stint at the Secretariat is both highly remunerative as well as a source of diplomatic training and grooming. Indeed, an assignment at the Secretariat has emerged as a key vehicle for career advancement.²³ A third and unanticipated channel of elite entry at the Secretariat comes at the level of locally recruited Indonesian staff where fresh university graduates with elite bureaucratic and diplomatic family backgrounds, Western degrees, and proficiency in English and foreign languages, use the early experience at the Secretariat as a springboard to orbit out to other international organisations.

In sum, the body of staff in the contemporary Secretariat is described by a sharpening contrast between, on the one hand, newer staff with tenuous links to local elite networks, lower cultural capital, and long backgrounds in government service, and, on the other hand, by lingering channels of staff well connected to elite networks, endowed with higher grades of cultural and social capital, varied experiences of international travel and education, and often moulded by the dictums and tactics of the ‘pioneers’ whom they invariably knew through professional and social interactions. The bases of convergence at the Secretariat are thus more muddled and less integrative. The implications are not just felt in social cohesion within the Secretariat with varying class backgrounds producing varying modes of sociabilities at the workspace and outside. They have a more substantive impact in shaping the interpretation and practice of ‘servicing’ states. With lower assets and government backgrounds, some among the newer staff are seen to yield too easily to the script of the literal servant as opposed to the tactical servants of years past.

EROSION, DENUDATION, AND THE CRY FOR A PROFESSIONAL SECRETARIAT

The success of the Secretariat’s patrimonial model depended not only on performing in the backstage of diplomacy but also in suppressing and deferring underlying tensions built into state-secretariat relations. Emblematic of this problem has been the inability and indeed

²² On the latter point, see Lim Hong-Hai (2007) “Ethnic Representation in the Malaysian Bureaucracy: The Development and Effects of Malay Domination,” *International Journal of Public Administration* 30 (12-14): 1503-1524.

²³ While this pattern is discernable in all CLMV foreign ministry bureaucracies, it is arguably most pronounced in the case of Lao PDR where officials with stints at the ASEAN Secretariat (as Attachment Officers, Senior Officers, Assistant Directors, and Deputy Secretary General) have gone to take senior posts in the foreign ministry as well as serve as Ambassador to the UK and as Permanent Representatives to the UN in Geneva and New York.

disinclination of the Secretariat's management in demanding a vital institution to check the excesses of state prerogative: a staff union or a legally empowered staff welfare association at the ASEAN Secretariat. Given that one finds staff unions in the Jakarta offices of the ILO and UNDP, and robust Staff Associations in other proximate International Organisations like the Asian Development Bank in Manila, this absence has less to do with anything 'Asian' than with the 'ASEAN Way' itself.

With the Secretariat beginning to bear the full brunt of stagnant salaries, job insecurity, high turnover and chronic under-occupancy, the benign foundations for sustaining a patrimonial bureaucratic model had come under strain. It was in this context that Surin Pitsuwan arrived in Jakarta in 2007 as the new Secretary General of ASEAN. As a politician with a Harvard PhD degree, and as a former Foreign Minister of Thailand who had once steered ASEAN's high politics during Thailand's Chairmanship of the Association, Surin was used to performing on the front stage of diplomacy. Taking office, Surin promptly inaugurated a sustained call for foregrounding "a networked Secretariat": a "nerve centre" more autonomous, with larger resources, and with staff not merely servicing states but openly extending their professional expertise and knowledge. The aim was not to be supranational as much as to move from a patrimonial bureaucratic form towards accentuating the suppressed rational-legal bases of the Secretariat's bureaucracy in the front stage of diplomacy.

Surin's aspirations and expansive style were perceived to have added urgency among member states to establish a Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) – a body of full-time ASEAN diplomats permanently stationed in Jakarta in 2009. With the arrival of the CPR, a body unprecedented in ASEAN's diplomatic history, the once distant and itinerant gaze of states under the Standing Committee that met four times a year was now proximate, everyday, and panoptic. Following the short-lived victories over coordinating ASEAN's response to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, Surin's subsequent tenure in the era of the CPR was described by intense state oversight, the breakdown of trust, and perennial deadlock. Surin's response was to orbit out of the Secretariat and embrace the life of the roving SG raising the Association's profile on the international conference circuit. The price of this chain of events would be borne by staff at the Secretariat who were rendered both rudderless and (in the absence of law) bereft of the SG as a 'backer' in their routine dealings with states. That said, while many state agents are quick to blame Surin for his expansive style and conception of his role, one would argue that given the state of erosion at the Secretariat, a figure like Surin would have to be invented if he did not exist.

CONCLUSION

I have recounted this history to substantiate two main points. First, the argument that the Secretariat has always been weak is unfounded given the operation in the past of a patrimonial model under which the Secretariat was certainly no locus of power but its staff nonetheless harnessed, borrowed, and channeled the power of states in the backstage of diplomacy. Second, a heightened rational-legal model may seem eminently desirable, but

the real test lies in how this model weathers ASEAN’s diplomatic *modus operandi* and group dispositions enshrining state prerogative. As 1992 demonstrates, a professional secretariat was captured and reined in by states often in the intimacy of everyday practices and interactions.²⁴ Similarly, Surin’s experience discloses how a frontal call for a rational-legal bureaucracy produced mistrust and deadlock. In conclusion, supporters of a “strong” Secretariat must reckon with what kind of bureaucracy is *permissible* under the aegis of ASEAN’s diplomatic practice. Indeed, who else will render the emotional labour to level the diplomatic field and enable and stage the mythic performances of sovereign equality? Likewise, those lulled into the conclusion that a patrimonial model works best for ASEAN will have to ask how this model can be sustained without the demands of emotional labour becoming exploitative, as they have been in the past.

There is, then, some credence after all to how the discourse on “strengthening” the Secretariat has linked the future of this diplomacy to the status of its Secretariat. The credence lies not in the certainties of a rational-legal Secretariat enabling an ‘efficient’ ASEAN performing ‘centrality’ in Asian security. Rather, the credence is in the framing itself: a different Secretariat unshackled by the gaze and force of ASEAN’s diplomatic practice would spell a different ASEAN diplomacy indeed.

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²⁴ A recent revision of the salary-scale at the Secretariat is a case in point. Quite apart from concerns over its competitiveness and consistent application among all staff, a deeper concern pertains to the absence of any guarantee for these salaries from stagnating over time, as it happened after 1992.