



The Habibie Center

Talking ASEAN

**"Myanmar's Chairmanship of ASEAN:
Updates and Reflections"**



Presentation and Discussion Report

Thursday, 5 June 2014 at 14.00 - 16.00
The Habibie Center Building
Jl. Kemang Selatan no. 98, Jakarta 12560



DISCUSSION REPORT

Talking ASEAN on “Myanmar’s Chairmanship of ASEAN: Updates and Reflections”

The Habibie Center, Jakarta, Thursday, June 5, 2014

Introduction

JAKARTA – On Thursday, 5 June 2014, The Habibie Center held a Talking ASEAN dialogue entitled “Myanmar’s Chairmanship of ASEAN : Updates and Reflections” at The Habibie Center Building in Jakarta. This edition of Talking ASEAN featured H.E. Amb. Bagas Hapsoro (former Deputy Secretary-General of ASEAN for Community and Corporate Affairs, ASEAN Secretariat), Mr. Kyaw Naing Latt (National League for Democracy, Myanmar), and Dr. Kusananto Anggoro (Senior Lecturer at The Postgraduate Studies Program in Strategic Intelligence, University of Indonesia) as resource persons with Dr. Alexander C. Chandra (Associate Fellow, The Habibie Center) as the moderator.

The objectives of this Talking ASEAN dialogue were as follows: (a) to discuss progress of Myanmar chairmanship in ASEAN and what lessons could be taken, (b) to analyze Myanmar chairmanship in ASEAN and explore collaboration amongst member states to go through ASEAN Community, and (c) to discuss progress of regional governance issues in ASEAN and what future steps should be taken in order to enhance regionalism in Southeast Asia. Key questions to be addressed by the dialogue included: What is the progress of Myanmar chairmanship in ASEAN? What are the lessons that could be taken by other Member States? How could Myanmar bring the agenda on regional governance improvement amidst the ongoing domestic situation? And in what way will the ASEAN Member States collaborate to go through ASEAN Community 2015?

This discussion report summarizes the key points of each speaker as well as the question and answer session that followed.

H.E. Amb. Bagas Hapsoro (Former Deputy Secretary-General, ASEAN for Community and Corporate Affairs, ASEAN Secretariat)

The first to speak at the Talking ASEAN dialogue was H.E. Amb. Bagas Hapsoro. He began by looking at ASEAN at a glance, noting that despite the growth in GDP there still needed some more investment and infrastructure. He also said it was necessary to make sure that the ASEAN Member States were ready to reach the target of the ASEAN Community 2015 which would see a single market and production base and a regional economic bloc that was competitive and equitable.

On the role of Myanmar and the ASEAN Chairmanship, Amb. Bagas said that Myanmar’s priorities for 2014 were to give effective and timely responses to urgent issues or crisis situations affecting ASEAN, promoting relations with external parties, carrying out other tasks



and function as may be mandated, and to ensure the full implementation of tasks in realizing the ASEAN Community 2015. In this sense, Amb. Bagas said that the remaining tasks left by the prior chairs of ASEAN would need to be taken into account.

Amb. Bagas went on to say that Myanmar had set priority areas for accelerating the implementation of the ASEAN Community, reviewing the status of community building, setting future initiatives to vitalize ASEAN, formulating programs in promoting ASEAN's external relations, and carrying out the review of ASEAN Charter. At this point he noted that it had been five years since the ASEAN Charter was first adopted and moreover there was a need to strengthen the capacity of the ASEAN Secretariat and so it and other organs of ASEAN should be reviewed. Amb. Bagas stated that the chairmanship of ASEAN provided Myanmar with a platform to conduct a mid-term review of the implementation of the ASEAN Regional Forum's (ARF) vision statement, and to develop a new vision for ARF.

Another priority highlighted by Amb. Bagas was to transform ASEAN into a people-centered organization, enhancing engagement with civil society, accelerating the participation of women, youth, parliamentarians and media in the activities of ASEAN, and to work on developing the ASEAN Vision beyond 2015.

Observing that Myanmar had chosen the theme of 'Moving Forward in Unity to a Peaceful and Prosperous Community', Amb. Bagas felt that Myanmar had successfully chaired several major ASEAN meetings beginning with the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) Retreat in January 2014. In the declaration produced at the 24th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN leaders addressed issues including the acceleration and consolidation of the ASEAN Community 2015, the implementation of the Declaration of Conduct of parties (DOC) in the South China Sea, accelerating the ratification of the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (SEANFWZ) and enhancing external relations.

Amb. Bagas also cited Indonesia's desire to reconsider having a new moratorium on additional ASEAN dialogue partners. He felt countries in Africa and Latin America were making strong economic performances and so Indonesia wished for these economies to be considered as candidates for new dialogue partners. Picking up on concerns over the likely influence of China over Myanmar, Amb. Bagas stated that Naypyidaw had shown a fair and wise attitude towards Beijing and to ASEAN. He felt this was a good attitude as he stressed that a chairman should be able to keep equal distance with external parties and ensure the Southeast Asian region remain united

Lastly, Amb. Bagas pointed out that Myanmar had produced an ASEAN Joint Statement in support peace. However he admitted there was a need for the region to help improve Myanmar's international reputation and its national economy so that it would have a more elevated role as a regional leader.

Mr. Kway Naing Latt (National League for Democracy, Myanmar)

The second speaker was Mr. Kway Naing Latt who began by acknowledging certain opposition to Myanmar taking over the chairmanship of ASEAN for 2014. For example, he highlighted concerns among some ASEAN observers that Naypyidaw would not be capable of standing up to China on the issue of the South China Sea. However he felt that Myanmar's President Thein Sein had been making a good impression and that Myanmar had taken on a people-centered approach. Mr. Kway highlighted the ongoing reform process as well as existing conflicts with

ethnic groups which should be taken into consideration. Here Mr. Kway cited efforts to amend the country's constitution. He also explained that Myanmar supported the centrality of ASEAN. This was not only true for President Thein Sein but for everyone in Myanmar. He ended by saying that the country had a vision and a mission for where it wanted to be and hoped that within a year or two, Myanmar would be able to have made comprehensive changes for the good of the country and the region.

Dr. Kusnanto Anggoro (Lecturer, Department of International Relations, BINUS University)

The final speaker was Dr. Kusnanto Anggoro who stated that when he was first invited to speak at Talking ASEAN, what he had in mind was to compare Myanmar's Chairmanship with that of Cambodia in 2012 which had been a disappointment because ASEAN had allowed itself to be divided over the South China Sea. As such the key question for Dr. Kusnanto was whether or not Myanmar would be able to stand up to China over the South China Sea and make some contributions to resolving the dispute in 2014. He admitted that there were many in the region and beyond that were skeptical over Myanmar's capabilities to manage ASEAN's position viz-a-viz China. However Dr. Kusnanto opined that if we looked at the Naypidaw Declaration produced in May 2014, it was widely agreed that Myanmar had done a successful job at the helm of ASEAN. Moreover, it had so far shown that Myanmar would not be an instrument for advancing China's interests in the region. While admittedly it was unlikely for Myanmar to find immediate solutions to the South China Sea, Dr. Kusnanto felt that at the very least, the ASEAN Summit hosted by Myanmar had been a good one.

Dr. Kusnanto then went on to identify some of the key reasons why Naypidaw was eager to ensure Myanmar's chairmanship of ASEAN would be a success. Firstly it was seen as complimentary to its domestic reforms which had seen: (1) the release of political prisoners, (2) the registration and electoral participation of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD), (3) relaxations on press controls, and (4) other democratization reforms taking place. Crucially according to Dr. Kusnanto were the various agreements the Myanmar government had reached with various insurgent groups over the past year.

Lastly, Dr Kusnanto highlighted some of the problems Myanmar would continue to face. Among them were: (a) further transition to democracy, (b) civilian-military gap, and (c) the Rohingya problem. While on the one hand there had been positive external responses from parties such as the European Union, the US and Japan – for example ending the travel ban against Myanmar officials and partial lifting of sanctions – there were also new tensions being witnessed such as between Naypidaw and Beijing over the latter's supposed support for the Kachin Independence Army.

He ended by noting that Myanmar had made some notable achievements with its domestic reforms which should be seen as a positive development. Though there existed some shortcomings, he made the point that even with Indonesia, which had been embarking on *Reformasi* for over 15 years, there still remained problems so it was impossible to expect for Myanmar's reforms to be a smooth process given it had only been running for a few years. Dr. Kusnanto also mentioned that ASEAN took the perspective of positioning itself as a collective body. As such he congratulated Myanmar for being able to maintain ASEAN Centrality during its chairmanship so far, unlike in 2011 when Cambodia held the chair.

Question and Answer Session

Comment No. 1: Myanmar has the best opportunity now to play a constructive role in the South China Sea. Myanmar is the chairman of ASEAN and a non-claimant party in the South China Sea dispute. We should not forget that Myanmar signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. My suggestion is that the six non-claimants of ASEAN should encourage the four ASEAN claimants to sit down and talk with China and Taiwan. I think the situation is similar with Cambodia in the 1980s when Indonesia at the time under the initiative of Ambassador Mochtar Kusumaatmaja initiated the informal cocktail party inviting all the people who were fighting at that time to meet. Myanmar could do the same thing now to cool down the South China Sea disputes. Don't miss this opportunity.

Comment No. 2: I agree with the first comment. First, historically, Myanmar is the only ASEAN country that has produced a UN Secretary-General. It was also a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. On the South China Sea dispute, I suggest Indonesia and Myanmar create an initiative as non-claimant parties. Indonesia has experience in its dealings with the Cambodia issue back in the 1980s so we can learn from this.

Comment No. 3: Are the multilateral institutions still relevant with the South China Sea issue? China is using multilateral institution like CAFTA. They are, in my opinion, willing to use that. Is China interested to use ASEAN on the South China Sea issue?

Moderator: Can the three speakers also give your thoughts on the recent spat between China and ASEAN Secretary-General who recently made a comment which revealed his position on the South China Sea. How do you think Myanmar will react to this spat?

Responses:

Amb. Bagas: I agree with the first comment that Myanmar is in the best situation as a chairman and a non-claimant. I'm also thankful that from time to time he regularly reminds us to encourage every ASEAN chairman to take some initiative to solve the problem of the South China Sea. Concerning the suggestion to have an ambassador-at-large dealing specifically with this problem I think this is very advisable. To the second comment, I hope Myanmar will make another good success story and I take the suggestion regarding a joint Indonesia-Myanmar initiative. Informal discussions between conflicting parties are a good idea and we must encourage this type of informal cocktail parties, where they can have a heart-to-heart, between friends and away from the media. I also think that multilateralism is very essential. Regardless whether it is effective or not, everyone must thrive to have the discussion within the multilateral framework.

Dr. Kusnanto: I agree with the comments from the audience. There should be some statement in the final declaration that could be made to endorse that kind of solution. We must find alternative patterns to address the South China Sea; be it via bilateral or multilateral forums and/or be it via informal discussions or as part of a joint initiative. Actually Indonesia's Foreign Minister, Marty Natalegawa has already taken the initiative but there has still not been any

agreement among the ASEAN member-states. Could a Code of Conduct be considered as conflict resolution? There is also problem like the discussion of sovereignty which is a tricky business. Would cooperation such as a joint Indonesia-Myanmar initiative be possible? How to determine the division of labor regarding these initiatives? These are the questions that need to be addressed.

Mr. Kway: Now is the best time and opportunity for Myanmar and we are also considering this situation. Regarding the joint Indonesia-Myanmar initiative, I think this suggestion is very worthy. In the past authoritarian regime, there were many things we did not know but now that we are in the reform era, the Myanmar government and the people are learning a lot about how to manage conflicts.

Comment No. 5: The South China Sea issue is not easy to settle. ASEAN as the regional organization is not a party of the dispute (i.e. it is ASEAN member-states). In my opinion, bringing this dispute to the United Nations or to an international tribunal will not work. I just give a suggestion to the chairman of ASEAN to make an initiative like Indonesia did in the 1980s by bringing fighting parties to meet and discuss in an informal environment. The informal meeting should be aimed at bringing the claimant and non-claimant parties together. Indonesia had some success when it was the ASEAN chair but not Brunei. Why? Because Brunei is also a claimant party. If Myanmar takes the initiatives now, who will oppose them? I hope Myanmar takes this opportunity and do something.

Comment No. 6: What role can be played by other institutions (such as the ASEAN Institution for Peace and Reconciliation) in resolving the South China Sea? Also what do we expect will be Myanmar's legacy as chairman other than the South China Sea issue?

Comment No. 7: The South China Sea is a problem over claims. We need to talk about the core of the issue which is the 9 dash line. In fact the best party to clarify the 9 dash line is Taiwan as they were the one that introduced it without properly explaining it. China simply adopted Taiwan's claims.

Responses:

Mr. Kway: Peace and reconciliation are now important issues in Myanmar. The government has formed a committee to negotiate with ethnic group insurgents in order to achieve a peace agreement. So hopefully with the forming of the committee and reaching the peace agreement, the government will establish peace in the country.

Dr. Kusnanto: The notion of security sector reform as part of the democratization in Myanmar requires more preparation. Myanmar, in my opinion should learn from the Indonesian experience. It is not only enough to push the military out of politics but also we need to strengthen the civilian capacity. This is the next part of the Disarmament, Democratization and Reconciliation (DDR) process.

Amb. Bagas: About the ASEAN Institute for Peace and Reconciliation (AIPR), we can share experience among ASEAN member-states in an inclusive process. So Indonesia can share its experiences in dealing with ethnic problems in places such as Aceh, Poso, etc. This is not only for the success stories but also for the failures which is important for others to learn from. We can also learn from the successes and mistakes of the Mindanao problem in the Philippines for example as there are some similarities. I hope we can soon open the actual office of AIPR by November this year. By opening the AIPR, we hope to have more discussions with many dialogue partners and we can also discuss about the ASEAN future, the ASEAN Secretariat issue, how to make the ASEAN Secretariat effective, and discuss about it in High Level Task Force.

Dr Kusnanto: In my experience while dealing with the Chinese, they always give different responses and answers. When you ask the Chinese army, official and academician, the answer is always different about the nine-dash line.

Comment No. 8: Taiwan controls the biggest island in South China Sea but we are not included in any of the discussions. In my opinion Taiwan should be included in these discussions because we need both parties, China and Taiwan, if we ever want to resolve this dispute.

Comment No. 9: About the issue of peace and reconciliation, we see there is rising religious intolerance not only in Myanmar, but also in places such as Indonesia and Malaysia. What is the meaning of this phenomenon?

Comment No. 10: What will be the impact of economic integration and how will it affect the role of China in the region?

Comment No. 11: What is the domestic impact of Myanmar being the chair of ASEAN? Do the people of Myanmar see it as regional recognition of Myanmar's reform efforts?

Responses:

Amb. Bagas: I cannot comment on the increasing religious intolerance in Myanmar but as an Indonesian I will say something about what is going on here. I agree with the statement of Sultan Hamengkubowono (of Yogyakarta) who said "enough is enough." Indonesia is a very diverse country and we can tolerate many things, but this is too much.

About the trade pact, it is not difficult for us but I can say that the issue of South China Sea has been going on for 20 years. Although the ASEAN Economic Community 2015 must be done and completed by the end of 2015 I think there is no linkage with this and the South China Sea issue. We are now dealing with the ASEAN+6 especially in the Regional Economic Comprehensive Partnership (RCEP) and at the moment there is the 5th Round of RCEP negotiations in Singapore. The world is in a very different situation after the collapse of the WTO and Doha Round talks. However I feel very positive, as the spirit of having an economic agreement is there. I know it's quite naive, but let's think very positive on this issue.

Mr Kway: The people in Myanmar consider peace and reconciliation as the important issues. So we are concerned about amending the constitution and also about the South China Sea issue. I



think the people are more aware about the internal domestic issue rather than the ASEAN Chairmanship issue.

Dr. Kusnanto: There has been a lot of reluctance among ASEAN member countries to talk about the rights of religious minorities. In Indonesia, for example, the Gerindra Party's manifesto talks about addressing "deviant" religious groups which worries the public. Even Aung San Suu Kyi is reluctant to talk about religious issues such as the Rohingya case. We must transform these religious issues into something else such as 'human rights' or 'protection of minority'. In other words we need to move away from the religious context.

We must also set a clear distinction about what we would like to achieve. Talking about promotion, development and affirmative action would be easier and can be done at a multilateral forum like ASEAN if we are clear. I think the effort to protect minority groups from violence needs to be addressed at the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting. We need to segregate general issues into more operational issues.

About China's economy, I am not responsive to that. I don't believe in the theory of greater interdependency between economies will lead to a lessening of conflicts. I believe that both issues can be developed mutually, independent from one another. We can exercise more trade, but we must also make special efforts to manage the tension at the same time. For example, although we see rising economic relations on the one hand, we also see increasing tensions between Vietnam-China and the Philippines-China.

Comment No. 12: We are a private sector that is interested in pushing forward the AEC. We often travel around the region to meet other stakeholders and try to develop partnerships with others in the private sector. What we often find is that many no little about the AEC and are apprehensive about it. What is Myanmar as Chairman doing to help push for greater publicity? How do we make it into something that is not limited to government talk but so that it also becomes a discussion among the people on the streets?

Responses

Mr. Kway: We know that we are the citizens of ASEAN now. We can travel freely in the ASEAN region without a visa. What needs to be done is greater efforts to promote and socialize the notion of ASEAN awareness to the people. This is what we should work together to achieve.

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