

Knowing Our Identity in 2015: My Experience in AYVP

From 11th August-15th September 2014, 50 youths from across ASEAN countries came together to try their best to settle the problem of heritage issues during a gathering in Malaysia. During the course of the gathering, this group of volunteers learned a lot as they interact with each other. Indeed, I feel so fortunate to be a part of the ASEAN Youth Volunteer Programme (AYVP): Young Heritage Leaders group.

In the first week of the programme these 50 young people gained lessons about ASEAN and its vision and functions of the regional bloc. In that opportunity Mr. Ky-Anh Nguyen, the representative from ASEAN Secretariat, told us that defining an ASEAN identity is a complex issue, as each country will argue for their own definitions. In the end, he believed that ASEAN community does not have a proper definition for its identity. He also delivered his idea that a true community is not decided by its identity, but by its vision. Similar idea was also brought forward by one of our heritage leader from Singapore, Charmaine, "that ASEAN move towards a shared-vision, rather than a shared-identity."

When the time came to discuss ethnic, national, and ASEAN identity, every participant voiced their mind. One participant's idea, from my friend Isti Toq'ah, was particularly interesting for me. She believed that it is important to highlight the fact that ethnic identity cannot be changed and is difficult to deny. For example, I am half-Acehnese and half-Javanese and I cannot change this fact as it was inherited since I was born. This led to the next question, what is national identity?

Indonesia was seen to have a strong national identity as was pointed out by my fellow participants during the event. That understanding was based by our definition of national identity as the union of ethnic groups, recognized by a single citizenship status and sharing the same vision as a country. However a unique perspective came from Malaysia, a multi-ethnic country. They stated that from wherever and whoever you are, as long as you love the country, being proud of one's nationality, then you have that national identity of that particular country. However, even with that understanding of identity, the many differences between ASEAN countries can still

understandably raise a question, "If we are that different with one another, why should we form a regional community?"

If your answer is to better compete on a global level, you might be right but not one hundred percent right. If so, then why should we include Myanmar, Laos or Cambodia? According to World Economic Forum (WEF) those countries are still building their nascent financial system which led them to not even be a part of The Financial Development Index 2012 rankings tabulation. And why should Singapore join this regional association in the first place? Singapore ranked 4th on the tabulation as this country possesses highly developed financial system which is complemented by a good legal and regulatory framework. Singapore is just too far ahead from most ASEAN countries. There is such a stark contrast in term of economic development within ASEAN. Nevertheless, these ten countries decided to still form a community and start the Initiative for ASEAN Integration (IAI) and IAI Work Plans to narrow the gap.

Even with so many differences we have more similarities. As Indonesians we might be different to Vietnamese or Cambodians, most of us never even visit their countries or truly know their customs and traditions. Nevertheless as we get to know each other better, we will find that there are similarities between our countries and nations. Most of us eat rice, play similar games, and sing similar tunes. And personally, I was quite surprised to find that Thai cuisine has that is familiar to Indonesian cuisine. Maybe it is because of those similarities that I automatically feel more comfortable mingling around my ASEAN friends.

My experience shows that not only our geographic, political, and economic factors that are important, but our similarities in tradition and culture also play core part in binding ASEAN countries together. The shared-values among countries had previously led solidarity to come upon during its initial stage. And now, it is important that we should not leave any country behind, and instead we shall move together as a strong integrated regional community.

Sometimes the countries within ASEAN seem so divergent that integration seems to be difficult to construct. However, solidarity between countries can be a start to build a melting pot between countries. ASEAN citizens are encouraged to own the feeling of solidarity over each other. This feeling can lead to active participation by the ASEAN citizens towards the ASEAN community itself. Indeed, the vision of bringing the community to the prosperity, peace, and harmony is impossible with each ASEAN countries standing alone.

In 2015, ASEAN community will be formed, and a new identity as ASEAN citizens will be a part of our daily lives. Some people see it as a threat to our national identity. I believe it is because they do not comprehend ASEAN

well enough. The idea of integrated community is not to erase our true identity, but to enrich our identities itself. The vast gathering of many traditions and cultures that belongs to individual ethnicities distributed across ASEAN countries is the identity of ASEAN. Once we lose this rich understanding of identity, we lose our ASEAN. Our role as citizens are important because who else can define and construct the identity if not its own people? This is the reason why protecting and preserving our cultures and traditions are important to all of us, because now we are all ASEAN Citizens.

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Celebrating A New Myanmar

I always see Myanmar as one of the most exciting country in the world. This country has colorful formative years, a mostly disastrous Socialist era, iron-fisted military dictatorship era following the failed 8888 Revolution, and this era where a civilian – albeit an ex-general – took the presidency and effectively the government to good effect. Myanmar has gone through a long, winding, and often bloody path. Today, they have found a light at the end of the tunnel. They are now one of the best-performing countries in ASEAN, bearing in mind the fact that it has only been three years since the reforms started. Indeed, the World Bank has declared that Myanmar is truly an emerging country. This would not be possible without the dawn of a new era in Myanmar.

A New Era

A new fresh air of democracy and openness was brought upon Myanmar with the dawn of a civilian government. This start has proven to be a beacon of hope for the Burmese. Economy is flourishing in an unprecedented manner with its citizens engaged in a more privatised and mostly free economy. The direct benefits of the strengthening Myanmar macro-economy is a healthy economy growth of 7,8% in 2014 alone. Furthermore, in terms of GDP per capita, an enormous growth can be seen in the last 10 years. In a relatively short time, Myanmar has gone from \$194 in 2004 to a respectable \$1700 in 2014. If there is a lingering doubt on whether reform in Myanmar had brought progress, the aforementioned numbers are surely positive indications.

During my diplomatic internship at Indonesian embassy in Yangon, I have personally witnessed the rapid growth of Myanmar's first capital: how offices and apartments are developing rapidly, and how the streets are full with cars. These are sure signs of a growing economy. It is also interesting to note the rising house and apartment prices in Yangon, with more and more people seek ways to make business and live in Yangon – and Myanmar in general – as they see it as one of the most promising place to do business in South East Asia.

As far as economy goes, we should not forget how blessed Myanmar is with abundant natural resources. With a relatively small size – more or less the size of Kalimantan – Myanmar possesses a large reserve of natural gas, which amounts to 11,8 trillion cubic feet, according to the Myanmar Ministry of Energy. It also has a huge reserve of oil which amounts to 3.2 billion barrels. Knowing this, China has been engaged in a lot of gas piping projects in Myanmar for a long time, and currently India is also investing heavily in Myanmar's infrastructure in what can be perceived as an attempt to be closer to Myanmar. Apart from the large amount of fossil fuel reserves, Myanmar also holds one of the world's biggest reserves of precious gemstones such as ruby, sapphire and jade which contributed a substantial amount of the GDP. Unfortunately, official figures are difficult to come by due to the opaque mining industry which still enables smuggling to Thailand, China and Bangladesh. My occasional trips to Bogyoke Market in Downtown Yangon has provided a glimpse on how low the prices of those stones are, arguably more than anywhere else in the world.

Myanmar truly is a wealthy country with huge economic potentials to be an economic powerhouse in South East Asia, should it be managed properly.

That being said, we can get a sense that Myanmar has similarities with Indonesia. Both are countries bestowed with rich natural resources and strategic geographic locations. Myanmar is notably located between two Asian giants, India and China. In terms of geopolitics, as they face the Andaman Sea and the Indian Ocean, Myanmar has the potentials to play a strong and influential role in either ASEAN or South Asian affairs.

I personally see a great opportunity for Myanmar in the future to set their own active foreign policy and help shape the architecture of the region.

Nevertheless, there are still several challenges for Myanmar to solve. Apart from the occasional skirmishes with Kachin armed rebels, the Rohingya question still lingers. Indeed, despite international pressure the government has not changed their stance of not amending the 1982 Citizenship Law, which does not recognize the Rohingyas as one of Myanmar's official ethnicity. This issue has grown from a domestic ordeal to a region-wide problem because thousands of Rohingyas are fleeing to Australia in search of better lives and to avoid persecution.

Consequently, a number of ASEAN countries such as Thailand and Malaysia have become either a temporary or permanent transit for them, which in time will burden respective governments. I believe this issue is one of the earliest tests for the new Myanmar government's resolve for reform. Moreover, they will mostly do it alone without too much assistance from other ASEAN countries owing to the non-interference nature of ASEAN.

Future relations with Indonesia

Indonesia has had a long and cordial relationship with Myanmar for nearly 65 years, dating back to 27 December 1949. And now, along with Myanmar's economic and political reforms, Indonesia can support them more actively in multiple aspects by promoting both government-to-government cooperation and people-to-people contact. By having a democratically healthy and economically sound Myanmar as a partner, it will reap not only considerable benefits for Indonesia, but also for ASEAN as a whole for it will bring about an incentive for a smoother ASEAN integration in 2015 and beyond.

President Joko Widodo has also met President U Thein Sein before attending the ASEAN Summit in Naypyitaw in November 2014. The meeting showed strengthened resolve for both countries to work closer. Later in a less-formal event with the Indonesian citizens in Myanmar, President Jokowi also reiterated that Indonesians should make a "pre-emptive strike" on Myanmar's market because it is still largely untapped and the potential for our investments are just exhaustive.

The newly - reinvigorated Myanmar has truly proven itself to be a cause for celebration. And it is only natural for Indonesia to join in the party. As the date of the diplomatic relations commemoration is fast approaching, it is high time for us to put Myanmar into perspective: to realise that they are going forward, to realise that they have every element to be successful, and also to realise that some challenges still lay ahead for this emerging democracy.

I believe that Indonesia can always set a credible and friendly example as we walk alongside Myanmar in the region.

However, we should remember that there is still homework to do especially on the issue of Rohingya in Rakhine State. In this regard, Indonesia needs to continue as Myanmar's partner in resolving this issue. Indeed, Indonesia has shown strong commitment in supporting the conflict resolution in Rakhine, for example through the construction of 4 schools with a total value of US\$ 1 million. This will hopefully allow the Rohingyas to attain better education in hope for a better-educated society which will have a more open perspective to the concept of living mutually in peace despite any apparent differences. Hopefully, this will help pave the way to a sustainable reconciliation.

Ultimately, Myanmar is too good an opportunity to miss, and too formidable a country to underestimate. Indonesia must play an active part in boosting the development and overseeing the ongoing reform progress of Myanmar; not for our own good, but for the good of ASEAN, and ultimately the whole region.

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Bridging The Region's Security 'Noodle Bowl'

For economic observers of the Asia-Pacific region, the term “noodle bowl” is nothing new. With rival negotiations for the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and US-led Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) taking place, the region is confronted with the difficulties that ensue from the intertwined overlapping of regional trade agreements. Officials are keen to underline that such negotiations complement one another.

The same cannot be said with the region's emerging security “noodle bowl”. For example, the Quad — initiated in 2007 by Australia, India, Japan and the United States — has and continues to be seen as an anti-China initiative. The Quad differs from the ASEAN approach of engaging China through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the East Asian Summit (EAS).

Despite reassurances of the Quad countries that their initiative is founded on the democratic peace theory and not aimed at China, Beijing views the proposed “Asian Arc of Democracy” in an altogether more threatening light.

Indeed the lack of significant progress of the Quad can be attributed to China's strong and negative reaction.

However in recent weeks there have been some talks about reviving the Quad initiative with India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi sounding particularly keen.

It was in this context that India announced a new security agreement with Australia in November 2014; more recently New Delhi hosted the high profile visit of US President Barack Obama during India's Republic Day celebrations — during which India and the US renew their 10-year US-India Defense Relationship framework.

At the same time, think tanks from the Quad countries met in early February 2015 with the Jakarta-based The Habibie Center in Bali, for a Track II Quad-Plus Dialogue.

The aim of this dialogue was to discuss the fundamental shift in the Asia-Pacific's geopolitical dynamics and its implications on issues of mutual interest including regional challenges to peace and interstate security; defense cooperation; counter terrorism/extremism cooperation; and diplomatic coordination.

The choice of Indonesia as the “Plus” country for the Track II activity was seen as particularly apt — any discussion on the fundamental shift in the region's geopolitical dynamic would be amiss to ignore a nation-state of 250 million people, an economy of US\$868 billion (in

2013), and a total land and sea territory encompassing 1,919,443 square km spread across 14,000 islands

Beyond these quantitative aspects are Jakarta's qualitative credentials that make it the ideal country to bridge the differences between the Quad and China and address the misunderstanding, mistrust and uncertainty that exists among the region's major powers.

For example, Indonesia has for decades actively sought to contribute to the creation of a world order based on freedom, justice and perpetual peace as mandated in the 1945 Constitution.

Anchored by this constitutional mandate and guided by the principle of *bebas aktif* (free and active), Indonesia has consistently put itself forward to be part of the solution and not as part of the problem facing the region. Indonesia's role in helping to open up Myanmar to the international community and embracing human rights and democracy is one example of this. So too was Jakarta's effort in preventing clashes between Thai and Cambodian forces from escalating into open war over the Preah Vihear temple complex a few years ago.

Significantly, Indonesia's approach to providing solutions focuses on reducing tensions and not exacerbating them. Jakarta prioritizes the settlement of differences by peaceful means, through dialogue and diplomacy. Not military approaches or punitive sanctions that only brings suffering to the people.

Moreover Indonesia believes in reaching comprehensive solutions by engaging all parties and stakeholders involved.

As noted during the dialogue we cannot resolve the South China Sea by not talking with China. We cannot promote security in the Asia Pacific region by excluding North Korea. And we cannot tackle Islamist extremism by not addressing the root causes that give birth to radical thinking.

It is with this in mind, that Indonesia's contribution to the region and its potential as a “bridge” should be given more recognition. While the term “a million friends and zero enemies” is no longer used by the current government, the basis for it remains true.

Indonesia continues to face a “strategic environment where no country perceives Indonesia as an enemy and there is no country which Indonesia considers an enemy”. Indeed, presently Indonesia has good relations with all four Quad countries and China.

However, while Indonesia's potential as a "bridge" was being outlined in Bali to our friends from the Quad countries, it is perhaps Indonesia's own government that would have benefited most from the discussion.

The increasingly nationalistic, unilateral and hard line tone emanating from Jakarta have led to serious questions about the implications of the new government on Indonesia's foreign policy, whether it will turn away from its engagement with the region, and if it is still committed to promoting democracy and human rights.

While it is natural for President Joko "Jokowi" Widodo to try and set himself apart from his internationalist predecessor, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, it is important

that the government does not swing too far to the opposite side of pendulum.

Just as it would be amiss for the Quad countries to ignore the contribution and potential of Indonesia to the region's peace and security, so too would it be equally amiss — if not more — for Indonesia's own government to overlook its status as "bridge".

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Do We Really Need Development Goals for ASEAN?

It was not surprising to see the serious interest surrounding the 25th Asean Summit in Naypyitaw, Myanmar. After all, while the establishment of the Asean Community later in 2015 is already a fact, what will actually happen post 2015 in Southeast Asia is not yet clear.

It was in this spotlight that the summit produced the so called Naypyidaw Declaration on Asean's post-2015 vision.

In the brief document that outlined a vision of post-2015 Asean, we can see that Asean members decided to "promote the development of clear and measurable Asean development goals". To see such a commitment in an open regional declaration, one question needs to ask why.

After their formulation, the Asean Development Goals — if managed similarly to the global Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) — will be adopted by Asean countries to help design their national development strategies.

The development goals will also be a benchmark for the success of development in Asean countries.

Therefore, if Asean countries decide to pursue, for example, better literacy rates, lower maternal and infant mortality, as well as better environmental sustainability then the success of a nation's development in Asean will be measured against those targets.

Moreover, as a part of the post-2015 Asean Community vision, they will also be referred to as measurements of the success of the whole Asean Community. All of these can be positive steps forward for ASEAN countries.

The use of development goals as measurements of success might balance the trade-heavy narrative of the ASEAN Economic Community. This will make the idea of economic integration more grounded in the needs of common people and sound less threatening to them. Taking inspiration from the MDGs, the Asean Development Goals can promote a more inclusive regionalism through the participatory process.

This can also push Asean countries to readjust their focus and put more priorities and resources into socio-economic issues, such as those described above. And more importantly, they will make it possible to augment the implementation of MDGs, and perhaps also their successors the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

MDGs, and the yet-to-be-seen SDGs, feature prominently in this article since they can be considered as one of the success stories of international development cooperation.

The first success of the MDGs is simply the fact that they managed to exist in a world where international cooperation is not always looked upon favourably, let alone in something as lofty as development cooperation. One of the reasons for this success is that the MDGs were formulated to be, to borrow the words of former UN secretary general Kofi Annan, "ambitious, but [...] technically feasible".

Secondly, countries have used the MDGs as reference points for their national development agendas, and they also have collectively made substantial progress in achieving MDG targets. We can now see that globally extreme poverty has been reduced by half since 1990,

more than 2 billion people now have access to drinkable water (a rise of 76% since 1990), and gender parity in school enrolment increases throughout developing regions and at all levels of education.

These kinds of success story also apply to Southeast Asia. As such, Asean Development Goals, or any international and regional development goals for that matter, should be compared to both MDGs and SDGs in terms of what they are trying to achieve and how they were formulated.

Furthermore, to give the Asean Development Goals reason for their existence, in some ways they should address the shortcomings of MDGs and SDGs. However, not all of these should be addressed since some of the perceived shortcomings of MDGs and SDGs are just too narrow to be addressed in global or regional development goals, e.g. addressing specific issues such as domestic legislation for land rights that are best discussed and solved at a national level.

The issues that can and should be addressed by the Asean Development Goals are ones that result from having many countries and stakeholders in a vast consultation process. Some of these include difficulties in accounting for dynamics in power and politics between stakeholders in trying to formulate and then achieve the development goals. Such dynamics are often what determine which targets are preferable and “feasible”.

As regional development goals, they have the potential to achieve this. Region-specific development goals can provide room for more focused discussions and stronger partnerships, which are difficult to facilitate in the broad reaching MDGs or their successor SDGs. Henceforth they can address development issues that are not, or just cannot be, facilitated in the MDGs and SDGs.

To this end, the process of defining goals must be transparent, participatory and inclusive. The framework of the Asean Development Goals should be formulated in extensive consultation involving stakeholders at local, national and regional level.

Marginalized groups who found difficulties in joining the MDG and SDG consultation — especially due to constraints of resources on their part — should be encouraged and promoted to join the process.

To fulfil their potential, the Asean Development Goals should not be formulated half-heartedly or as another product of compromise. If this occurs then why bother? Instead, the Asean Development Goals should be commitments that truly focus national resources on addressing socio-economic injustice.

While they are region specific they should not shy away from addressing issues not addressed in the MDGs and

SDGs, while at the same time being tailored to Southeast Asian needs. Their targets can be realistic in accordance with the resources that are available. But they should still try to reach deeper than the global development goals.

Indeed, the main question should not be whether Asean countries can have development goals made by and for ourselves or not. The question should always be why we need our own development goals.

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