

Rethinking the Process for Timor-Leste's Application for ASEAN Membership



SUMMARY/BRIEF

This issue of ASEAN Briefs examines the process for Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN membership. First formally submitted in 2011, Timor-Leste's application has been going on for almost five years with no end in sight. This stands in stark contrast to the speedy time taken to admit Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam to the regional grouping in the late 1990s (despite the fact that Cambodia even experienced a period of political violence after its formal application was submitted).

This edition of ASEAN Briefs forwards three main arguments. First, that the application process has been slowed down by bureaucracy, a lack of transparency, and the inclusion of additional steps that was not the case for CLMV countries. Secondly, that the lack of information about the state of Timor-Leste's application makes it difficult for the Timorese government and people as well as interested stakeholders from carrying out the necessary activities to prepare Dili for ASEAN membership. Third, many of the negative concerns expressed to oppose Timor-Leste's membership of ASEAN have a weak basis, are becoming increasingly irrelevant, and ignore Dili's positive potential to the regional grouping.

Having made the case for the aforementioned arguments, this edition of ASEAN Briefs proposes a set of recommendations for policy makers involved in Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN membership.

ASEAN Briefs is a regular publication about current developments on ASEAN regionalism, especially in the Political-Security, Economic as well as Socio - Cultural Pillars.

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Introduction

As early as 2001, the government of Timor-Leste identified joining ASEAN as a major “priority” for the country as it emerged from first centuries of Portuguese and later decades of Indonesian rule.¹ This priority was given fresh impetus in 2011 when Timor-Leste submitted a formal application for ASEAN membership. Dili’s bid has not only intrigued the many stakeholders involved in ASEAN’s vision of a peaceful, stable and prosperous region but it has also divided them. Among the many divisive questions that Timor-Leste’s application raises are: Is Timor-Leste prepared for membership of ASEAN? Will its membership slow down and negatively impact ASEAN’s regional integration project? What benefits, if any, will a successful application from Dili have on Timor-Leste and ASEAN?

Given the above, Timor-Leste’s application has not always received a warm welcome by the ten ASEAN member-states. Following the formal submission in 2011, media articles reported that several ASEAN foreign ministers ‘directly questioned Singapore’s insistence on rejecting Timor Leste’s bid.’² Singapore has often been seen as one of the most reluctant to admit Timor-Leste to the regional grouping arguing Dili would be a substantial economic burden on ASEAN. Vietnam, Malaysia and Lao PDR have also expressed serious concerns and questioned Timor-Leste’s capability and readiness to assume the obligations of ASEAN membership.³

Despite this, there are other ASEAN member-states that have strongly supported Timor-Leste’s membership application; most notably Indonesia.⁴ It is no coincidence that Dili’s application was submitted during Indonesia’s chairmanship of ASEAN in 2011. Furthermore, Cambodia and Thailand are said to support Timor-Leste’s immediate entry into ASEAN while the Philippines have also spoken

in favor.⁵ While ASEAN decision-making operates on the principle of unanimity, it is interesting to note that the majority of ASEAN member-states essentially support Dili’s inclusion.

The Complex Road towards ASEAN Membership: Unnecessary Bureaucratic Hurdles

In light of the differing views of the ten ASEAN member-states, it is unsurprising that the process has been going on for almost five years with no end in sight. As Secretary-General Le Luong Minh admitted, ‘There is no definite time on when would it be joining ASEAN.’⁶ This differs markedly from when the CLMV countries applied to join the regional grouping in the 1990s. While the circumstances in the 1990s are different from today – ASEAN was a much looser organization back then without the pressure of a regional economic integration agenda and with only around 250 meetings whereas now there are over a thousand meetings – it is nonetheless interesting to note the speed with which the CLMV countries were admitted to ASEAN.⁷ Cambodia submitted a Letter of Intent to join ASEAN in April 1996 and at the 30th ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM) a year later, it was announced that Cambodia together with Lao PDR and Viet Nam would be admitted to the regional grouping.⁸ Despite the fact that Cambodia’s admission to ASEAN had to be postponed due to the outbreak of political violence in Phnom Penh that saw the removal of Prince Ranariddh from office, Cambodia was nevertheless able to join the regional grouping in April 1999.⁹

While Cambodia took ‘4 arduous years to be accepted as a member’, this was still shorter than the time it has taken for Timor-Leste’s process. This is in spite of the fact that Dili has not experienced the type of political violence seen in Phnom Penh since their respective formal applications were submitted.¹⁰ The lack of progress with Timor-Leste’s application – especially when compared to the relative speedy time taken for the

5 Ibid & Government of Timor-Leste (2013, June 19). ‘Singapore and the Philippines express support for Timor-Leste’s bid for ASEAN membership after Official visits’. Retrieved from: <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=8411&lang=en>

6 Xinhua English (2013, April 29). ‘Timor Leste faces uphill to join ASEAN.’ Retrieved from: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2013-04/29/c_132349461.htm

7 ASEAN (2011). “ASEAN in the Global Community - Annual Report 2010-2011.” Retrieved from <http://www.asean.org/publications/AR1011.pdf>

8 Din Merican (2007). ‘Cambodia’s Engagement with ASEAN: Lessons for Timor Leste.’ *CICP Working Paper* No. 14. Retrieved from: <http://www.cicp.org.kh/userfiles/file/Working%20Paper/CICP%20working%20paper%2014-%20Cambodia%20Engagement%20in%20ASEAN%20by%20Din%20Merican.pdf>

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

1 Government of Timor-Leste (2011, March 16). “Meeting of the Council of Ministers, 16th March of 2011.” Retrieved from <http://timor-leste.gov.tl/?p=4732&lang=en&lang=en> & Asia Foundation (2011, May 25). “Making Timor-Leste’s ASEAN Accession a People-Centric Effort.” Retrieved from <http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2011/05/25/making-timor-leste%E2%80%99s-asean-ascension-a-people-centric-effort/>

2 Abdul Khalik and Mustaqim Adamrah (2011, November 17). ‘ASEAN to review Timor-Leste’s bid’, *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved from: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2011/11/17/asean-review-timor-leste-s-bid.html>

3 Mushahid Ali (2011, April 29). ‘To Admit or Exclude Timor Leste? Implications for ASEAN integration’ *RSIS Commentaries* No. 66/2011. Retrieved from: <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/1538-to-admit-or-to-exclude-timor-l/> & Initiatives for International Dialogue (2013, June 7). ‘Philippine Civil Society to Support Timor-Leste bid for ASEAN membership.’ Retrieved from: <http://www.iidnet.org/philippine-civil-society-to-support-timor-leste-bid-for-asean-membership/>

4 Mushahid Ali (2011, April 29). Op.cit.

CLMV countries to join the regional grouping – has led to some speculations that Dili’s bid is being deliberately slowed down. Laura Southgate, Senior Lecturer at the Dept. of Defence and International Affairs, the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, suggests, ‘it is clear that there has been some foot-dragging on the issue. Whether this is on purpose or due to ASEAN’s bureaucratic style is difficult to say.’¹¹ Leading credence to this suggestion is the establishment of an ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group (ACCWG) to “discuss all relevant aspects related to the application by Timor-Leste, as well as its possible implications on ASEAN.”¹²

By introducing this bureaucratic hurdle, ASEAN has created an additional layer that Timor-Leste’s bid must pass in order for Dili to realize its ambitions of joining ASEAN. As noted by Mushahid Ali, former Singaporean Ambassador to Cambodia, the establishment of the ACCWG allows ‘the subject be further considered by a working group of officials rather than forwarding the issue to the Heads of Government for a decision.’¹³

In the almost five years since Timor-Leste’s formal application for ASEAN membership, the ACCWG has regularly met to consider the various aspects of Dili’s bid. Following each meeting, officials from ASEAN/ASEAN member-states have more or less made similar assertion: that Timor-Leste’s application is not yet ready for consideration by the ASEAN Leaders.’¹⁴

In addition, another bureaucratic hurdle appears to have been added to the process with the commissioning of independent studies by the ACCWG. The purpose of these studies are to consider the implications of admitting Timor-Leste on ASEAN’s political-security, economic and socio-cultural pillars. Curiously, the addition of this hurdle appears to have been added at a late stage in Timor-Leste’s application process. A review of all the Chairman’s Statements of the ASEAN Summits since Timor-Leste first submitted its application reveals that the inclusion of independent studies was only made public following the 24th ASEAN Summit held in Nay Pyi Taw, 11 May 2014.¹⁵ The previous five ASEAN

Chairman’s Statement made no such mention about carrying out independent studies suggesting this step was a new element added into the process.

Clearly the road towards Timor-Leste joining ASEAN has been complicated by the inclusion of additional bureaucratic hurdles which did not exist when the CLMV countries applied to join the regional grouping in the 1990s. In the next part of this edition of *ASEAN Briefs*, key issues related to these additional bureaucratic hurdles will be highlighted and explored in greater detail.

Key Issues with the Application Process

1. *Obscurity surrounding the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies*

Information regarding the state of Timor-Leste’s application appears limited. A case in point is the independent studies commissioned by the ACCWG. While its existence was first made known to the wider public in 2014, inquiries by the ASEAN Studies Program found that the first study was actually commissioned in 2012 with the results presented at a preparatory meeting for the 22nd ASEAN Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam, April 2013.¹⁶ Curiously, no mention was made of this in the Chairman’s Statement of the 22nd ASEAN Summit that year.

Basic information about the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies – such as which organizations/institutions are responsible for examining which respective political-security, economic and socio-cultural implications of Timor-Leste’s application – have proven difficult to find from ASEAN sources. The website of the ASEAN Secretariat (www.asean.org) reveals little information about the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies while emailed inquiries requesting such basic information from the ASEAN Secretariat were not responded to.

Indeed it was only via an article written by Termsak Chalermpanupap in 2015 that revealed,

‘Starting with economic implications, a study was undertaken in early 2013 by Prof. Dr. Richard Pomfret of the University of Adelaide, Australia...This was followed by a study on political and security implications, undertaken jointly by the Singapore-based Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) in early 2015. A similar study on socio-cultural implications will be conducted by Malaysia’s Institute of Strategic and International Studies; and is expected to be completed by end-2015.’¹⁷

11 Laura Southgate, e-mail message to the author, March 11, 2016

12 ASEAN (2011). *Chairman’s Statement of the 19th ASEAN Summit, Bali 17 November 2011*. Retrieved from: <http://www.asean.org/storage/archive/documents/19th%20summit/CS.pdf>

13 Mushahid Ali (2011). Op.cit.

14 Xinhua English (2012, September 11). ‘ASEAN official meet in Cambodia to discuss Timor-Leste’s application for bloc entry.’ Retrieved from: http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/world/2012-09/11/c_131843059.htm & Myanmar Times (2013, November 7). “Timor Leste on the ASEAN waiting list.” Retrieved from <http://www.mmtimes.com/index.php/national-news/8716-timor-leste-on-the-asean-waiting-list.html>

15 ASEAN (2014). *Chairman’s Statement of the 24th ASEAN Summit, Nay Pyi Taw, 11 May 2014*. Retrieved from: <http://www.asean.org/chairman-s-statement-of-the-24th-asean-summit-moving-forward-in-unity-to-a-peaceful-and-prosperous-community/>

16 Richard Pomfret, e-mail message to the author, March 10, 2016

17 Termsak Chalermpanupap (2015). ‘Timor-Leste’s Quest to Join ASEAN: The Process and the Pace’ *ASEAN Focus* Issue 1/2015 (August 2015). Retrieved from: http://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ASEANFOCUS_Issue1-2015.pdf

To date, the results of these studies have not been made publicly available. Inquiries by the ASEAN Studies Program found that since the studies were commissioned by ASEAN, the intellectual property rights of the document also belonged to them. As such the decision to publish the studies also belongs to ASEAN.¹⁸

From these statements it is questionable whether the results of the ACCWG-commissioned studies were even relayed to Timor-Leste. As noted earlier, the first study by Prof. Dr. Richard Pomfret was presented to a preparatory meeting for the 22nd ASEAN Summit and not necessarily to the Timorese government officials. Having said that, experts have suggested that more might have been discussed during ASEAN meetings than appears in print, 'so the Timor-Leste government might be more informed than we know.'¹⁹

Another question surrounds how the institutions were selected to undertake the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies. While the selection process involved an open-tender bidding system organized by the ASEAN Secretariat, it is perhaps surprising that, given the observations expressed by their governments, three of the four institutions involved are from Singapore and Malaysia. It is noticeable that Singapore's Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong 'reaffirmed Singapore's commitment to the ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group process.'²⁰ If read between the lines this statement may be interpreted as a subtle effort to delay Timor-Leste's application. Despite this, experts have commented that 'there is a relatively fair mix across the three studies... the ISEAS and S Rajaratnam School have likely been chosen due to their status as high-level, reputable research institutes.'²¹

One could, however, ask why think tanks from the CLMV countries were not sought to conduct studies either independently or in partnership with the four chosen institutions. While they may not have the same research reputation as their Singaporean/Malaysian counterparts, a case could be made that CLMV think tanks would have a better knowledge of the challenges a country must face in order to join ASEAN. At the same time, it could be questioned as to why an Indonesian think tank was not chosen, given the country's strong support for Timor-Leste's membership of ASEAN. Indonesia's inclusion together with CLMV ones would allow the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies be an even more fair mix that takes into account the wide and differing views from ASEAN member-states that range from those in favor, to those opposed and from the original founding members to those that have recently joined the regional grouping.

18 Farlina Said, e-mail message to the author, March 15, 2016

19 Laura Southgate, e-mail message to the author, March 11, 2016

20 Government of Timor-Leste (2013, June 19). Op.cit.

21 Laura Southgate, e-mail message to the author, March 11, 2016

2. Lack of Information about the general state of Timor-Leste's application

Related to the first key issue, is the general lack of information about Timor-Leste's application in a more broad sense. While Dili's bid has been ongoing for almost five years, very little information can be found regarding the state of Dili's bid from official channels. For the most part, statements found in ASEAN declarations/statements are generic and reveal very little. A review of the last nine Chairman's Statement of ASEAN Summits, in particular the content referring to Timor-Leste's application since it was first submitted in 2011, reveals some interesting findings. With the exception of the Chairman's Statement of the 19th ASEAN Summit, the content referring to Timor-Leste's bid were limited to only 1-2 sentences. Indeed the 21st ASEAN Summit held in Phnom Penh in 2012 saw no mention about Timor-Leste at all.

Comments by government officials, while revealing relatively more information, nevertheless do not tell much. For example in 2013, Myanmar officials stated, 'Timor Leste needs to follow the ASEAN Charter and Road Map but they are not ready for that.'²² Meanwhile in 2012, Cambodian officials claimed, 'We, ASEAN, are working to build a community in 2015, so some ASEAN member states are concerned over Timor-Leste's human resources shortages.'²³ Even, ASEAN Secretary-General Le Luong Minh vaguely commented, 'As a member of an organization you have to accept what are obligated to join it...Timor Leste still needs to develop its statehood system and mechanism, particularly in economic sector, that suit with requirements to become a member of ASEAN.'²⁴

While Timorese government officials may be privy to their country's application status (as suggested by experts before), the lack of public information available makes it likely that other Timorese stakeholders, such as business leaders, civil society groups and the wider public, are largely uninformed about what is going on. This is highly unfortunate. A strong case can be made that for Timor-Leste's membership of ASEAN to be a success it is important for all stakeholders to be involved in the process. Many studies have highlighted the general role that CSOs for example can play in a country. These include: (a) offering expert information on specific issues; (b) providing ground support for a policy's implementation; & (c) monitoring the consequences of those policies.²⁵

Chong and Elies elaborates by explaining that CSOs are able to help refine and optimize policies by providing expert or technical information and indeed government's

22 Myanmar Times (2013, November 7). Op.cit.

23 Xinhua English (2012, September 11). Op.cit.

24 Xinhua English (2013, April 29). Op.cit.

25 Chong, T. and Elies, S. (2011). An ASEAN Community for All – Exploring the Scope for Civil Society Engagement. (Singapore: International Press Softcom Ltd). pp.16-17.

sometime find it more advantageous to engage with CSOs – especially those with a deep working experience and technical knowledge in certain areas.²⁶ They add that ground support for a policy's effective implementation can be pushed by CSO engagement through the raising of public awareness.²⁷ Lastly with regards to monitoring the consequences of policies, Chong and Elies explains that CSOs are able to offer feedback to the government on its performance and efficiency by conveying concerns, providing recommendations to improve existing programs, developing new ones, and by identifying weaknesses and shortcomings.²⁸

As such, the current state of limited or only general information about Timor-Leste's application status makes it difficult for all stakeholders, especially CSOs, to help prepare the country for membership of ASEAN. This is because they will mostly be uninformed about the key areas (as identified by ASEAN) that Timor-Leste needs to focus on to enhance its preparedness to join the regional grouping. The lack of transparency could also be interpreted as an attempt to delay Timor-Leste's inclusion by preventing the Timorese from addressing issues with their application given they are unstated to the public.

3. Negative mindset towards Timor-Leste's inclusion in ASEAN

A third key issue with the current application process of Timor-Leste is the seemingly negative mindset adopted by ASEAN officials. As noted earlier, a number of officials from ASEAN member-states have displayed negative concerns regarding Dili's bid. This is true not only for officials from ASEAN member-states but also those from the ASEAN Secretariat, including the Secretary-General. In 2013, Secretary-General Le Luong Minh was reported to have said Timor-Leste's bid was 'facing uphill to join' ASEAN due to several lingering barriers.²⁹

It can be said that opposition to Timor-Leste's inclusion into the regional grouping focuses on three areas: (1) its ability to meet the obligations of an ASEAN member-state; (2) the notion that Timor-Leste will use ASEAN membership to seek financial assistance from the regional grouping; and (3) the perception that Timor-Leste is not stable enough for inclusion. These three areas of concerns are seen to consequently result in the hindering of ASEAN's progress towards its ASEAN Community 2015 that threaten to 'seriously undermine ASEAN's credibility and international standing.'³⁰

These concerns arguably have a weak basis, are increasingly becoming irrelevant, and ignore Dili's positive potential for the regional grouping. For example, the argument that admitting Timor-Leste to the regional grouping would hinder the realization of the ASEAN

Community 2015 is no longer applicable given that the launch date of 31 December 2015 has already passed. Indeed, it has been suggested that the adoption of the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 was an admission of ASEAN's failure to achieve the "people-centered" ASEAN by the end of 2015 and that by adopting the new Vision 2025, 'the 2015 goalpost has been cleverly moved.'³¹

Similarly the argument that Timor-Leste would not be able to meet its obligation as an ASEAN member-state seems somewhat contradictory given the current struggles facing Lao PDR as it takes up the ASEAN chairmanship for 2016. Vientiane has already announced plans to only hold one ASEAN Summit instead of the usual two required by the ASEAN Charter due to logistical concerns.³² Lao PDR will also not be hosting the annual ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN People's Forum (ACSC/APF) citing inadequate resources.³³ Such a state of affairs naturally leads to question marks as to why Lao PDR is afforded such exceptions, whereas they are raised as obstacles for Timor-Leste's admission.

Timorese officials, for their part, have pledged to build more schools and provide scholarships for students to study abroad in order to upgrade its human resources.³⁴ Moreover, Timor-Leste is developing infrastructure to host ASEAN summits and meetings, and establishing diplomatic presence in all ASEAN capitals.³⁵ Indeed Dili's improvements in these areas have been recognized by outside parties such as the Asian Development Bank who noted the country's 'remarkable progress since gaining independence in 2002', its 'well-functioning government' and the 'huge strides [that] have been made to improve living conditions and increase life opportunities.'³⁶

31 A Ibrahim Almuttaqi (2015, December 31). 'AEC Launch: Will it mean much for Southeast Asians?' *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved from: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/12/31/aec-launch-will-it-mean-much-southeast-asians.html>

32 The Brunei Times (2015, December 7). 'Laos to host only one ASEAN leaders' summit'. Retrieved from <http://www.bt.com.bn/news-national/2015/12/07/laos-host-only-one-asean-leaders%E2%80%99-summit>

33 Radio Free Asia (2015, December 4). "'Laos Refuses to Host Meeting of ASEAN Civil Society Groups'. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/laos/refuses-10122015173336.html>

34 Daily Express (2015, April 11). Op.cit.

35 Laura Southgate (2015, November 2). 'Timor-Leste bids for ASEAN membership'. *Global Risk Insight*. Retrieved from: <http://globalriskinsights.com/2015/11/timor-leste-bids-for-asean-membership/>

36 Shane Rosenthal (2015, November 21). 'Timor Leste belongs in ASEAN'. *The Jakarta Post*. Retrieved from: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/11/21/timor-leste-belongs-asean.html>

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid. p.17.

29 Xinhua English (2013, April 29). Op.cit.

30 Mushahid Ali (2011, April 29). Op.cit.

Table 1
Timor-Leste's Selected Indicators since Independence

Selected Indicators	2002	2014
GDP at market price (current USD)	444,000,000	1,417,000,000
GDP per capita (current USD)	496.2	1,169.0
Time Required to Start a Business (in days)	167 (in 2004)	10
Life Expectancy at birth (years)	61	68 (in 2013)
Mortality Rate, under 5 (per 1000 births)	99	55
Population aged under 15 (% of total population)	50	42
Gross Enrollment Rate, Secondary Education (% of population of secondary education age)	43	57 (in 2011)
Proportion of Seats held by Women in National Parliament (%)	26 (in 2003)	39

Source: World Bank

While concerns remain that Timor-Leste would seek financial assistance from ASEAN, Timorese officials have repeatedly stressed that this would not be the case. The then-President Ramos-Horta promised, 'ASEAN fellow members should not have to worry about any financial costs as Timor-Leste will not beg for economic or financial support.'³⁷ This was acknowledged by ASEAN, who conceded, 'Timor-Leste is a country that does not owe any country because it has a large amount of revenues from oil and gas.'³⁸ It was estimated that Timor-Leste's oil and gas sector contributed USD 200-300 million/month to the country's economy.³⁹ Such statistics led the then-Indonesian Foreign Minister Natalegawa to believe that Dili would eventually be a net contributor to ASEAN.⁴⁰

Lastly is the assertion that Timor-Leste is too political unstable to admit it into the regional grouping, and moreover that Dili's admission would pose a threat to ASEAN's stability and unity. While the early years of Timorese independence were marked by political violence, the country is now seen as 'a stable democracy' having held three open elections without incident.⁴¹ One observer compares Timor-Leste with other newly independent states such as 'crisis wracked South Sudan or the politically paralyzed non-state of Bosnia-Herzegovina' and asserts that 'Timor-Leste looks to have done remarkably well.'⁴² It should be noted that since Dili submitted its bid in 2011 there have been no incidents of political violence.

37 East Asia Forum (2011, May 16). "Why Timor-Leste should join ASEAN now." Retrieved from <http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2011/05/16/why-timor-leste-should-join-asean-now/>

38 Xinhua English (2012, September 11). Op.cit.

39 Daily Express (2015, April 11). Op.cit.

40 Mushahid Ali (2011, April 29). Op.cit.

41 Shane Rosenthal (2015, November 21). Op.cit.

42 Jordan Peterson (2016, January 11). 'Should Timor-Leste Turn to Portugal?' The Diplomat. Retrieved from: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/should-timor-leste-turn-to-portugal/>

If anything, failure to admit Timor-Leste into the regional grouping would pose a greater threat to regional peace and security as well as call into question ASEAN centrality. Experts point out that by not admitting Timor-Leste, ASEAN will reveal itself as incapable of solving problems in its "own backyard."⁴³ On the reverse side, admitting Timor-Leste would showcase the success of ASEAN's regional integration project by incorporating all the Southeast Asian nations under the ASEAN flag. A successful demonstration of ASEAN's capacity would lift enthusiasm among the peoples of ASEAN which to date is marked by low public identification and awareness with the regional grouping.

Indeed it has been suggested that Timor-Leste's long term interests lie with other regional powers.⁴⁴ It should be noted that a number of government buildings in Dili including the Presidential Palace and Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been constructed and funded by China as a "gift". In the face of China and India's rise as well as the United States greater interest in the region, failure to admit Timor-Leste would leave open a strategic vacuum in the region that if filled by other regional powers risk ASEAN's centrality and relevance in the regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific in the 21st century.⁴⁵

Failure to admit Timor-Leste would also ignore Dili's positive potential to the regional grouping. As noted earlier, its oil and gas sector earns Dili a significant amount of revenues. As a result of the revenues earned from this sector, Timor-Leste has managed to set up a sovereign wealth fund, which is estimated to reach a value of over USD 20 billion in the next decade.⁴⁶

43 A Ibrahim Almuttaqi (2015, October 11). 'The case for Timor-Leste's membership of ASEAN.' The Jakarta Post. Retrieved from: <http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2015/10/11/the-case-timor-leste-s-membership-asean.html>

44 Jordan Peterson (2016, January 11). Op.cit.

45 A Ibrahim Almuttaqi (2015, October 11). Op.cit.

46 Singapore Institute of International Affairs (2011, March 15). "Why ASEAN should admit Timor-Leste."

Having quickly achieved lower middle income status in 2011 and with one of the most open trade policies in the region – more liberal than several ASEAN member-states – Dili is forecasted to see 6.2% and 6.6 % GDP growth (discounting offshore petroleum) in 2015 and 2016 respectively.⁴⁷ Timor-Leste’s inclusion would therefore bring significant potential revenue to the ASEAN Economic Community and open up new markets for ASEAN businesses to explore.

Beyond Dili’s economic potential, are its political and socio-cultural contributions. Timor-Leste’s inclusion would enhance the diversity of views in ASEAN by bringing in a stable, democratic country to the regional grouping. Demonstrating the different political culture in Timor-Leste, Table 1 above shows almost 40% of Timor-Leste’s national parliament is made up of women, the highest in Asia ahead. Leading democracies in ASEAN such as Indonesia and the Philippines only feature 17% and 27% of women parliamentarians respectively.⁴⁸ In addition is the talented pool of Timorese diplomats that could potentially be made to serve ASEAN interests. Despite its small diplomatic size, Timor-Leste has nevertheless managed to notch up some notable diplomatic achievements. Timor-Leste became the president of the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) in 2014, acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2007, and was admitted to the ASEAN Regional Forum in 2005. The country’s ongoing dispute with Australia over a contentious Timor Sea Treaty has seen Dili take Canberra to both the International Court of Justice and the Permanent Court of Arbitration. These steps show that Timorese diplomats are capable of defending their nation’s interests but will do so via peaceful means in accordance with international laws and norms. In a period where ASEAN member-states have their own disputes with larger neighbors in the region, the experience of Timorese diplomats may prove helpful.

It is apparent that many of the negative mindset held by officials with regard to Timorese membership of ASEAN have weak basis, are increasingly irrelevant, and ignore Dili’s positive potential for the regional grouping. In this sense, the realities on the ground do not match with the concerns expressed by officials.

Recommendations

It has been shown that Timor-Leste’s application has been marked by obscurity surrounding the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies, a lack of information about the general state of Timor-Leste’s application, and negative mindset towards Timor-Leste’s inclusion in ASEAN. Taking all the above into account, this edition of *ASEAN Briefs* proposes three recommendations aimed at policy makers involved in Timor-Leste’s application for ASEAN membership:

Retrieved from <http://www.siaaonline.org/?q=programmes/commentary/why-asean-should-admit-timor-leste>

47 Shane Rosenthal (2015, November 21). Op.cit.

48 World Bank (2016). ‘Indicators’ Retrieved from: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator>

i. ASEAN should make information regarding Timor-Leste’s application status publicly available

Information regarding Timor-Leste’s application status should not be the sole preserve of ASEAN and its member-states’ government officials. Instead such information should be shared with all stakeholders. This will enable interested parties to take the necessary steps to help prepare the government and people of Timor-Leste for ASEAN membership. Without such information, interested parties – in particular civil society organizations working in Timor-Leste – are unable to effectively play their role in offering feedback to the government on its performance/efficiency, providing recommendations to improve existing programs/developing new ones, and by identifying weaknesses/shortcomings vis-a-vis Timor-Leste’s preparations for ASEAN membership.

At the same time, it is not enough that the little information that is provided by ASEAN is mostly general, vague and uninformative. This makes it difficult for stakeholders interested in building up Timor-Leste’s preparedness for ASEAN membership to know what are the key areas (as identified by ASEAN) that Timor-Leste needs to focus. In this regard, the results of the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies should be released to the public. It makes little sense that only ASEAN officials benefit from knowing the results of the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies. Instead ASEAN should enable everyone in the region to benefit from such information. This would in turn allow all interested stakeholders to have an in-depth understanding of what are the challenges that Timor-Leste must overcome to become a member-state of ASEAN.

ii. ASEAN should broaden the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies to be an even more fair mix that takes into account the wide and differing views from ASEAN member-states

The wide and differing views from ASEAN member-states regarding Timor-Leste’s bid should be taken into account by broadening the institutions/organizations involved in the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies. While not denying the credibility and capacity of the institutions/organizations that have already been selected to undertake the independent studies, ASEAN (as well as interested stakeholders) would benefit from a more comprehensive understanding of the implications of Timor-Leste’s admission by including as much views as possible on the issue. In particular, it would be extremely beneficial to hear the views from those that have recently joined the regional grouping as they would have a better knowledge of the challenges a country must face in order to join ASEAN. As such, ASEAN should consider including institutions/organizations from CLMV countries as part of the process. This can be done independently or in partnership with the four chosen institutions. At the same time, ASEAN should also

consider including an Indonesian think tank, given the country's strong support for Timor-Leste's membership of ASEAN. This would allow the process of the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies to reflect a wide range of views that covers those in favor, to those opposed and from the original founding members to those that have recently joined the regional grouping.

iii. ASEAN should adopt a more positive mindset with regards to Timor-Leste's application

The discourse surrounding Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN membership should be shifted to a more positive and encouraging mindset. Too often, comments from ASEAN officials have been marked by a negative mindset that tends to focus on why Timor-Leste should not yet be admitted to the regional grouping. Yet, in many cases the reasons cited for not admitting Timor-Leste at this moment in time have a weak basis, are becoming increasingly irrelevant, and ignores Dili's positive potential to the regional grouping. A case in point is the notion that admitting Timor-Leste to the regional grouping would threaten the successful realization of the ASEAN Community 2015, which launch date has already come and gone. Even the justification for the ACCWG-commissioned independent studies – to look at the “implications” of Timor-Leste's bid on the political-security, economic and socio-cultural pillars – implies a negative mindset. In this sense, ASEAN officials should play the role of championing Timor-Leste's inclusion, in much the same way that Malaysia's then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed strongly supported the regional grouping's expansion in the 1990s. While Indonesia's then-President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and especially Foreign Minister Natalegawa initially played this role, there has been no pro-Timor-Leste champion in ASEAN since the two stepped down from office. Neither their replacements in Indonesia, or peers in ASEAN have taken up this role, which is highly unfortunate as it allows the current mindset prevailing in the region to go unchallenged. Instead ASEAN should focus on the benefits, advantages as well as opportunities that Timor-Leste's admission would bring to the regional grouping; not least by enhancing ASEAN centrality and proving its relevance to the region. At the same time, the discourse should not be on why Timor-Leste is not yet ready for ASEAN admission but more on what Dili needs to do. The former approach only serves to discourage whilst the latter approach serves to encourage and gives something for Timor-Leste to aspire to.

It cannot be denied that significant obstacles remain and understandable opposition exists towards allowing Timor-Leste to join ASEAN. Yet at the same time, it cannot be denied that Timor-Leste belongs to the Southeast Asian region and should be part of ASEAN. The current ACCWG process – whilst not perfect - has thus been put in place to try to accommodate these two facts. While we can only hope that one day soon the

people of Timor-Leste may join hands with the people in the Southeast Asian region as fellow ASEAN citizens, it is clear that ASEAN should rethink the process for Timor-Leste's application for ASEAN membership to make it more transparent, more inclusive and more encouraging for the benefit of all interested stakeholders.

-- END --



The Habibie Center was founded by Bacharuddin Jusuf Habibie and family in 1999 as an independent, non-governmental, non-profit organisation. The vision of The Habibie Center is to create a structurally democratic society founded on the morality and integrity of cultural and religious values.

The mission of The Habibie Center are **first**, to establish a structurally and culturally democratic society that recognizes, respects, and promotes human rights by undertaking study and advocacy of issues related to democratization and human rights, and **second**, to increase the effectiveness of the management of human resources and the spread of technology.

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About ASEAN Studies Program

The ASEAN Studies Program was established on February 24, 2010, to become a center of excellence on ASEAN related issues, which can assist in the development of the ASEAN Community by 2015. The Habibie Center through its ASEAN Studies Program, alongside other institutions working towards the same goal, hopes to contribute to the realization of a more people-oriented ASEAN that puts a high value on democracy and human rights.

The objective of the ASEAN Studies Program is not merely only to conduct research and discussion within academic and government circles, but also to strengthen public awareness by forming a strong network of civil society in the region that will be able to help spread the ASEAN message. With the establishment of ASEAN Studies Program, The Habibie Center aims to play its part within our capabilities to the ASEAN regional development.

About Talking ASEAN

Talking ASEAN is a monthly public dialogue held at The Habibie Center in Jakarta. Covering a wide array of issues related to ASEAN, Talking ASEAN addresses topics of: Economic Integration, Socio-cultural, & Democracy, human rights and regional peace, among others. Featuring local and visiting experts, Talking ASEAN is one of a series of twelve dialogues regularly held each month and open to a target audience consisting of ASEAN officials, foreign ambassadors & diplomats, academics, university students, businesses, and the media.



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The Habibie Center and the Institute for Foreign Affairs (IFA) held a Talking ASEAN public dialogue on "Women Empowerment and Gender Equality in the ASEAN Economic Community".



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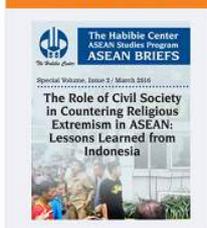
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