

Challenges asean will face in establishing a community



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ASEAN nations have signed the Cebu Declaration on the Acceleration of the Establishment of an ASEAN community by 2015 on the 12th ASEAN Summit in Cebu. This ASEAN community comprises of 3 main pillars, the ASEAN economic community, ASEAN political security community and ASEAN socio-cultural community. It is aimed at being a concert of Southeast Asian nations, displaying the outward looking nations that are living in peace, stability and prosperity as a whole region which is bonded strongly together in a dynamic and wide development and in a community of caring societies. However, it seems that due to the many differences between the countries, there would be many challenges in fulfilling its 2015 vision of establishing an ASEAN community by 2015.

Background of ASEAN

ASEAN was established on 8th of August 1967 when the Bangkok declaration was signed by Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia , Singapore and Indonesia. Brunei Darussalam joined the ASEAN community on January 1984 and Myanmar joined in 1997. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia became members in 1995, 1997 and 2004 respectively.

ASEAN was established to strengthen self-reliance and regional cohesion, while emphasizing social, cultural and economic cooperation and development. Another reason why ASEAN was formed was because back then, countries like China were getting too powerful and the only way the smaller countries could prosper was to group together. Thus, ASEAN was established. Now the main purpose of ASEAN is to help its members increase its economic growth and social development, and to establish peace between the ASEAN countries.

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Map of ASEAN countries

Overview of challenges

In this project we will study the ASEAN community and their commitment towards their goals, the problems they might face, and find the possible impact of it.

The security and religious issues continue to be a barrier for ASEAN, with the many ethno-religious movements that will likely affect the coherence and stability within a nation and possibly ASEAN as a whole. The issue of more transparent boundaries that will be established will also cause the security to be less tight and will affect the peace of all.

The different rate of economic development between the ASEAN nations is a huge challenge for ASEAN members in establishing a stable ASEAN economic community as the economy is a very important area and it will affect everyone in the ASEAN community.

The differences in political systems of ASEAN members also poses a challenge as it would be difficult for so many different countries to work together cohesively with the nations operating differently.

Challenge 1: Religious and security issues

One of ASEAN's greatest challenges in creating an ASEAN community is the security issues caused by ethno-religious movements and the more transparent boundaries that might greatly disrupt the peaceful coexistence that the ASEAN nations have tried established with one another. The ASEAN community will create more transparent boundaries so that it is more

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accessible for the people but that will also lead into a security that is not that tight and making it more unsafe for the people. The ASEAN countries remain vulnerable to threats from ethno-religious movements of the people who are hungry for self-governance. Ethno-religious movements have been a huge block for ASEAN in establishing a fully fledged ASEAN Community as there would be issues arising regarding the coherence of the country or the entire region.

Southeast Asia has housed Islamic militant groups for the past few decades. After the World War II, Southeast Asian countries mostly became independent as the colonial powers that once ruled then departed. The countries were governed by undemocratic and brutal governments and affected the Muslim identities and values. This stirred up a sense of antagonism and animosity towards their various central governments, causing a great impact on the stability and security of ASEAN as a whole.

Take for example, the Abu Sayyaf and Moro Islamic Liberation Front, both guerrilla organisations in the Philippines, are using political violence in attempt to pursue an autonomous Islamic state in Mindanao in the midst of the mostly Christian country and is said to have links to Malaysian and Indonesian jihadist forces. They have kidnapped foreign tourists from Malaysia, bombed a Philippines Airlines plane, assassinated and kidnapped priests and businessmen. Abu Sayyaf is said to have received arms and munitions from Afghanistan. It aims to evict Christians.

As stated in the 2003 Declaration of Asean Concord II, Asean “ shall urgently and effectively address the challenge of translating Asean cultural diversities

and different economic levels into equitable development opportunity and prosperity, in an environment of solidarity, regional resilience and harmony.”

Also, as ASEAN builds up its ASEAN Community, it also makes boundaries between the countries more transparent and this will result in a simpler way for terrorists groups to gather more members with the same beliefs as there is a larger number of people and the influence coming from so many areas will cause one to be daring enough to stand up for what they think that it is unfair to them as there are others backing them. This also makes it easier for terrorist's movements to move about within the region as there is a widespread of members throughout the whole ASEAN and resources will be easier to get and access resources within the region.

Even though ASEAN recognises that the region is divided into many ethno-cultural groups, efforts can only be taken to try to preserve the diversity in cultural heritage and to promote regional identity and it will be very challenging for ASEAN to overcome such issues to achieve a harmonious community. Along with the issue of more transparent borders, ASEAN can try their best to understand and accommodate the different religions and the reasons being such movement, however, ASEAN must also remember that even though the boundaries are more transparent, security must always remain tight and must always be alert and looking out for terrorist threats that will be constantly heading towards every country.

Challenge 2: Differences in each countries development rates

Different rates of development between ASEAN countries makes it difficult for all of them to work together cohesively on the large scale. Many ASEAN

countries have widely different economic states, making fulfilling the goal of establishing the ASEAN community by 2015 rather challenging.

GDP per capita of ASEAN countries as of 2005 in USD One example of countries with vastly different economic states is Singapore and Cambodia. Although Cambodia is more than 250 times the size of Singapore and has 30 times the population, Singapore has a much better economy. In Cambodia, as of 2004, the percentage of the population below poverty line is a whopping 31%, while comparatively, in Singapore, the amount of citizens below poverty line is almost 0%. The currency and GDP per capita of Singapore is also much higher than that of Cambodia, at 1.4 per USD and \$50,300 compared to 4221 per USD and \$1,900 respectively. Singapore also has a lot of well developed infrastructure while Cambodia has barely any infrastructure in the rural areas. With the huge differences in these statistics, it is easy to tell that the Singapore economy is doing much better than the Cambodia economy.

Another pair of countries with different development rates is Cambodia and Thailand, these two countries are right next to each other and both are relatively unstable. Both countries have gone through many economic and political troubles, but the economic situation in Thailand has generally been better than that in Cambodia, and the GDP of Thailand has constantly remained above that of Cambodia. In the countryside, Cambodia does not really have even the more basic infrastructure and the majority of Cambodia's population is in fact younger than 21 years old and many of these youths lack the skill and education required to help push forward Cambodia's economy. While on the other hand, Thailand has relatively well developed infrastructure and the countries people generally better educated.

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The GDP per capita of Thailand and Cambodia as of 2009 was \$8, 100 and \$1, 900 respectively. Although Thailand has slightly over four times the population of Cambodia, it has around twenty times the GDP. The death rate and infant mortality rate is also higher in Cambodia, and the life expectancy in Thailand is 73 years while in Cambodia it is 62 years. All these information shows that Thailand is a more economically developed country than Cambodia.

All these information shows that the countries in ASEAN all have vastly different economic development rates, this would pose a problem when attempting to fulfil the 2015 vision.

Statistics on ASEAN countries

Challenge 3: differences in each countries political system

Differences in government systems between ASEAN countries make it rather difficult for the countries to cooperate, as actions taken by different countries to tackle a similar issue may vary and there might be conflicts between the countries.

The type of government greatly affects the domestic stability of a country and many other aspects, such as the economy, security and welfare of the citizens. Differences in government system in ASEAN can be seen through the case study of Myanmar and Thailand.

Myanmar has a military government, in which military officers took up the majority of the ministries and cabinet posts which control the country.

Though major political parties, such as the National League for Democracy

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and the Shan Nationalities league for Democracy and parties representing other ethnic groups are present in the country, their activities are greatly suppressed and controlled by the military government. Little room is given for the political organisations while many parties and underground student organisations are prohibited by the military.

Despite pressure from ASEAN nations to release all the political prisoners and the request for greater progress towards democracy and a harmonious country, human rights in Myanmar remained poor. ASEAN nations had failed to come to an agreement on Myanmar's lack of political reform during the 12th ASEAN summit, as each country has their own opinions and concerns. While some countries do not wish to interfere with Myanmar's internal issues, others regard democracy and human rights issues as a possible obstacle for ASEAN to be integrated in terms of politics, which is part of the 2015 vision.

Furthermore, Myanmar ranks 178 positions out of 180 countries for the level of corruption in the country, according to the Corruption Perceptions Index. This also affects the military's efficiency and their practice of good governance in the country.

On the other hand, Thailand is under a constitutional monarchy government, led by a king, a Prime Minister and has a parliamentary democratic system with multiple political parties. In Thailand, their King is more of a symbol of national identity and unity rather than having direct power under Thailand's constitution. Thailand was similar to Myanmar in the way that Thailand was

under the rule of a succession of military leaders with relatively weak democratic system.

In the recent years, Thailand's political landscape has been constantly plagued with issues such as persisting and significant difference between the urban and rural political orientation and focus, and democratically elected leaders abusing their power and their conflict of interest.

Currently, the ongoing political unrest in Thailand began due to a coup d'état staged by the military in 2006 that overthrown Thaksin, the former Prime Minister, for corruption and abuse of power. Thaksin' supporters, who are mostly working class constituency and people from poor rural areas, accuse Thailand's urban elites for coordinating the coup. These poorer citizens liked his ideas of more affordable medical care and debt relief, which can greatly improve their living standard. This is one of the key reasons for the overwhelming support from the "red-shirt" protestors even when he was on self-imposed exile.

Not only was Thailand's national economy crippled by its political instability. Thaksin's supporters had disrupted the 14th ASEAN summit that was held in Thailand last year, and brought embarrassment to the ASEAN community.

All of these issues makes it difficult for the ASEAN countries to work together, and much things need to be done to dampen these problems.

Conclusion

ASEAN countries face quite a number of challenges towards achieving their goal of setting up an ASEAN community as there are always some problems

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in cooperation faced by the member countries. Security issues, political and government issues make it hard for countries to cooperate together to form the community. These problems faced will not allow the member countries to make decisions and agree with one another easily. To fulfil its dream of the 2015 ASEAN community, ASEAN has to put in much effort into rectifying these problems, even though much has already been done towards establishing the ASEAN community.