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No. 1/2023 (October 2023)

# In Search of Democracy in Southeast Asia: Can the ASEAN Way Go Hand in Hand with Democracy?

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## SYNOPSIS

*In one hand, contemporary dynamics in Southeast Asia offer the ASEAN Way as an approach that can provide positive engagement and still maintain the stability of the region, on the other hand, the approach through the ASEAN Way is considered a challenge because the efforts made by ASEAN in emulating the values in the region become complex and confusing. From this, ASEAN has also received a lot of criticism regarding the principle of non-intervention which is considered*

*to hamper the involvement of ASEAN countries to be able to act in conflict resolution. This write up attempts to address a challenge for each ASEAN member in responding and positioning itself so that regional stability is maintained.*

## COMMENTARY

To date, it is undeniable that Southeast Asia is a region with a fragmented and shifting state of democracy. In fact, the issue of democracy is likely to be an issue that continues to be discussed in the upcoming ASEAN agenda. At the 42nd ASEAN Summit meeting last May, as chair of ASEAN, Indonesia emphasized the importance of strengthening collaboration between ASEAN parliaments. This collaboration is expected to maintain and strengthen political stability and democracy in Southeast Asia (Kominfo, 2023). In addition, Indonesia is also tasked with responding to urgent issues or crisis situations that could affect ASEAN, as well as representing ASEAN in strengthening closer relations with ASEAN's external partners.

Indonesia's leadership in ASEAN today faces major challenges both from outside ASEAN and from issues within ASEAN member states themselves. Outside ASEAN, the US and China's rivalry in terms of trade and geopolitics continues and there is still no solution yet. In addition, the war between Russia and Ukraine until now there is no sign that the conflict will end soon, and it certainly has implication on the uncertainty of the world economy including for ASEAN.

Within ASEAN, Indonesia must work on the issue of Myanmar, which is still led by a military junta. Furthermore, Indonesia must also be able to resolve the issue of claims to the South China Sea (SCS) by several ASEAN countries such as the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei, and China. Other incoming issues such as on the rise of human trafficking in ASEAN also become one of the concerning issues that specifically raise during Indonesia chairmanship.

From this, ASEAN has also received a lot of criticism regarding the principle of non-intervention which is considered to hamper the involvement of ASEAN countries to be able to act in resolving conflict. This is a challenge for each ASEAN member in responding and positioning itself so that regional stability is maintained.

## Democracy Issues in ASEAN

The assumption of Asian style democracy is usually reinforced by the view that Southeast Asia still needs to improve the development and stability of the region. It is also argued that Asian societies are still not ready to embrace democracy, therefore it is necessary for the government to be active in providing guidance to its people or commonly referred to as tutelary government.

Democracy issues in Southeast Asia seem to be greatly affected due to the ASEAN principle in resolving problems. The issue of democracy in ASEAN can be seen from various cases. The election of Rodrigo Duterte in the 2016 election signaled the start of the bloody massacre of drugs, which explains the thousands of people who have died due to extrajudicial killings in the Philippines (Tempo, 2022).

In Cambodia, the dictator Hun Sen seems to have been very successful in winning the 2018 election, where he won all 125 seats in parliament (Reuters.com, 2018). The procurement of parliamentary elections in July 2023 also experienced a lot of criticism where the Cambodian

People's Party (CPP) had won 120 seats. The victory will pave the way for Hun Sen to transfer power to his son Hun Manet (Inews.id, 2023).

While in Vietnam, bloggers and activists are still arguing for land reform, eradicating and ending corruption, and for greater democratic freedoms, they are being arrested and imprisoned (Safenet, 2017).

The latest news from Myanmar is that the Junta or Myanmar's military governing council has decided to postpone the election, after the government postponed the election that was promised to be held in August 2023. Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the military junta, reported that the state of emergency in Myanmar was extended and will last for the next six months (Detik.com, 2023).

The resolution of these incidents seems to be hampered by the principle that ASEAN member states must adhere to, especially non-intervention. There is not much that member states can do especially in dealing with the humanitarian crisis caused by the military coup and undemocratic governments that has occurred in Myanmar, the approach that ASEAN countries can currently do is to use diplomacy or by using the other ASEAN Way.

Southeast Asia has always had an incompatible relationship with Western norms of democracy and human rights, and it is evident that after a period of liberalization and civil liberties, these norms and rights have regressed. As a result, the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Brunei, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Singapore are now all led by strong leaders or can be called one-party states.

In addition, Modernization Theory, which states that the more economic development or industrialization a country undergoes, the more democratic it becomes, does not seem to apply in Southeast Asia. This paradox can be seen in the two countries with the highest level of economic development in Southeast Asia, Singapore and Malaysia, which should be considered the most democratic countries.

## **What Can ASEAN Members Do?**

The step that can be taken by ASEAN countries is to implement neighboring partnership, where in fact the improvement of regional cooperation in Southeast Asia is currently still represented by ASEAN as a regional organization which in this case has intergovernmental relations. If Southeast Asian countries only focus on ASEAN, then the application of the concept of well-neighboring will be very difficult to achieve, keep in mind that in diplomatic affairs each country will only pursue their own internal benefits compared to pursuing regional benefits, this is the problem if Southeast Asian countries still focus on ASEAN alone. In addition, countries in ASEAN tend to choose cooperation through the bilateral system, because the complexity of bilateral relations is much lower than using regional relations (Aminuddin, et al., 2017).

Another thing to note about ASEAN is that its conflict resolution model is not very strong. This is due to the nationalist politics that are still very strongly embedded in each country, therefore organization within the region plays a lesser role. The approach that can be taken in this regard is the need to encourage closer co-operation and formulate policies collectively. This has been done in Cambodia or ASEAN's reconciliation mission in East Timor, both of which succeeded in changing political mindsets, especially on the concepts of governance and autonomy.

The design of Asian-style communitarian democracy, which is a local value, is very important for ASEAN countries. This is evident because communitarian democracy is different in terms of making room for the local wisdom and cultural values that Southeast Asian countries compared to the democratic values brought by the West. Using local wisdom and cultural values that contain a sense of communitarianism, democratization in the region will promote regionally based conflict resolution for any political disputes within ASEAN. The sense of communitarianism itself will flourish among ASEAN peoples if the value has substantial connectivity that unites the sense of communitarianism.

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