

Four narratives of ASEAN that makes it unique at 50

Tuesday marked the completion of the golden jubilee of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which was founded on Aug. 8, 1967. This regional grouping came into being with a membership of five countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

Between 1984 and 1999, five other nations, namely, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia, joined it to make it an association of 10 states. It is unique in its essential character for it is different from both the European Union.

Unlike EU, it is not a supra-national organization. It may be recalled that following the turn of the century, ASEAN set for itself the goal of graduating to an ASEAN Community by 2015, a program that was launched with three specific pillars — political-security, economic, and social-cultural — promised a comprehensive umbrella of functions. The member governments are all agreed on the roadmap that promises to take them to their common destination.

In the past, Southeast Asian region has always been divided, sprawling culture, but for most of the past 50 years, it was held together by a unifying story. It was the story of accelerated economic growth, social progress and cultural development to provide regional peace and stability.

ASEAN's success was the story of leaving the mutual suspicion, venturing into a wilderness and creating a new promising future for its citizens. That story rested upon amazing level of consultation, compromise and consensus — “the ASEAN way.”

There are four narratives in the ASEAN way. First, there is a story of multi-cultural ASEAN. It sees ASEAN citizens as members of groups, whose status is largely determined by their nationalities and their socio-cultural



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background. This multi-cultural narrative dominates ASEAN's community building process and educational systems. It makes the product of these social capital creations — the students, the future citizens of ASEAN — more able to think in-terms larger than their own identity group, which means they can find a common ground or effective arguments that can reach people of different background, in the future.

Second, there is the narrative of globalized ASEAN. This narrative is dominant in urban centers and industrial parks. This story come with an exhilarating ideology of economic integration, supported by regional production networks, that flattened economic hierarchies, strengthened the local supply chains, discarded old elites and empowered low-middle income families and individual workers.

But in real life, when you disrupt old structures, you end up concentrating power in fewer hands. This narrative works out well for people and industries who well prepared for competition, but not so well for most others.

Third, there is the liberation but people centered narrative that dominates ASEAN as a land of free nations and individuals responsible for their own fate, both economically and socially. This story celebrates the dynamism of the economic integration that fulfill the social aspiration and hopes of the people. Its prime value is economic freedom and environment sustainability, which in default brings human centered progress, by regarding ASEAN as a community of entrepreneurs, tax payers, consumers and work-

ers — indeed everything except citizens.

Fourth, there is the narrative of ASEAN centrality, which resonated ASEAN at the center of an array of regional institutions involving partners in East Asia and beyond, such as ASEAN+3, ASEAN Regional Forum, Asian-Europe Meeting and the East Asia Summit. ASEAN centrality is the conviction that has brought new identity because of the unity and the strength — the unity in elite decision making, which have no allegiance to a central authority, but evolve through consensus and self-confidence.

Maritime and territorial disputes in the past and present threatened ASEAN unity and centrality. But this story is always forward looking, pragmatic and optimistic. This narrative may have contempt for democratic norms and liberal values, but stabilizes the very idea of objective ASEAN.

To take an objective view, ASEAN in the past 50 years has made significant contribution to peace, security and prosperity in the region. ASEAN has many socio-economic and political achievements to its credit, but the challenges are plentiful too. With a population of 628 million and a combined gross domestic products (GDP) of US\$2.4 trillion, it is the world's seventh largest market and third largest labor force, and it has been projected to become the fourth largest economic bloc by 2030.

Mari Pangestu, a former Indonesian minister, said in an ERIA forum that ASEAN is now threatened by slow recovery in the global economy; increased anti-globalization, anti-immigration and anti-elite sentiments; disruptive technologies that threaten job growth; and expanding demographic shifts. She recommends that it “speeds up and widens the scope of regional economic integration.” But do ASEAN have the requisite will to execute this?

All of the four narratives provide a viable basis for successfully tackling this challenge. But, the future of ASEAN will be a competition between two other stories, which are sort of descended from the existing four.

The first is the mercantilist model, which sees ASEAN not as the culmination of history and socio-culture but as one more economic power in competition with neighboring economies like China, India, and so on. In this, to be ASEAN implies a member of an economic clan, and the ideal ASEAN member states and its partners are purely protector of this clan.

ASEAN governments and corporations work together with their citizens and partners by closely controlling trade, investments and immigration.

The second is the empowered community of ASEAN. This story sees ASEAN as a melting pot of all socio-economic and political cultures and the human history's greatest laboratory for cultivation of new talents, skills and abilities.

This model welcomes diversity in education, pluralistic views on innovation, open trade, meritocracy, and immigration for all the dynamisms these things unleash with ASEAN centrality.

The mercantilist model sees ASEAN as a mighty economic fortress in a treacherous world. The empowered community model sees ASEAN as a creative crossroads leading an open and fundamentally harmonious world. The empowered model will be an exodus story for ASEAN member states as well as other countries that are struggling to nurture and strengthen the roots of deepened regional cooperation.

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