

Headline: Asean must have another way

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If leaders cannot change when circumstances demand that they do, they would be out of touch and less effective. These words well apply to the Asean Way in the light of Asean leaders' community-building, especially in these times of climate crisis.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) was built upon opposition to imperialism. A nonaligned movement was initiated by Indonesia so that its neighboring governments refrained from taking any side during the Cold War. It was a tremendously difficult task at that time, considering that even before the war the peoples of the region were divided by a history of colonialism and ethnic and religious diversity, territorial fights and other antagonisms.

That Asean has survived the conflicting interests and constant mutual suspicion of its member-states may be attributed to the efforts of its political leaders to deal only with non-contentious matters such that no member would feel its national interests threatened by a group decision. This is the essence of the Asean Way, or consensus decision-making that does not diminish sovereignty or interfere in domestic affairs.

In today's very different environment, there are apparent efforts to move Asean to a higher plane of cooperation with emphasis on the economic and social side of the association. Examples are Asean's economic community-building and climate change initiative. In fact, how to keep efforts on track to realize economic integration by 2015 and how to implement the climate action commitments in the Bali Concord III are said to be on the agenda of the Asean Summit in Cambodia on April 2-3.

One thing, however, that was intentionally not changed over the decades is the Asean Way.

Hence, there are reasonable doubts about Asean's capability to make the single community a reality given the same old Asean Way still enshrined in its new Charter and valued by the incumbent political managers in the region. A community has some institutionalized structure that defines it independently from state membership. But because of the Asean Way, functional structures and compliance mechanisms cannot be set up, and in the absence of such, the Asean community will not have substance and strength to operate. There are also legitimate concerns that Asean's community-building is just another effort to reinvent from the top a process that does not have at the bottom a truly integrative thrust considering that the Asean Way does not include processes where the people engage in decision-making.

Sadly, the Asean Way is also the excuse of the 10 governments for their failure to get their act together in the UN climate change negotiations. While there were intentions and efforts by some governments to make Asean a relevant and strong actor in the negotiations, these were blocked by other Asean nations in the name of national interests. Leaders of the region failed to give the mandate to their negotiators to speak and act as a group in the climate change talks. Without the mandate, Asean joint leaders' statements, as well as resolutions to advance regional interests in its climate change initiative platform, are empty words.

Reminiscent of the ideological divide during the Cold War, present civil society advocacies that demand more renewable energy, energy efficiency, protection of forests and people's engagement in the formulation of national mitigation and adaptation actions to battle climate change are

dismissed by some Asean governments as imperialist schemes to sabotage their national economic development. Others label civil society advocacies as “too idealistic,” whenever political will is lacking to make the necessary changes possible.

Climate change does not have national domains or an ideological brand. Extreme weather events induced by climate change will have a similar impact across the nations of Southeast Asia due to their similar ecological features. In fact, a recent mapping by Hadley Research Center of UK shows Southeast Asia to be worst affected by the rise in global temperature with decreased water flows from the Himalayan glaciers. The latter will trigger a cascade of economic, social and political consequences. Accordingly, the effects will destabilize the region by 2030, just 15 years after the planned economic integration, as it faces wild monsoon variations with effects on coastal infrastructure, agriculture, marine currents and fish stocks. Coastal cities will be hit by subsidence and rising sea levels.

Obviously, a transnational problem like climate change requires transnational solutions without compromising the principle of historic responsibility. But the latter can never be an excuse for inaction. At present, it is clear that both tasks of building a single economic community and battling climate change cannot be done in the same old Asean Way.

The times demand that Asean leaders change the old way of doing things. If they cannot change, then maybe it would be best for them to keep Asean as a security consensus body where the Asean Way works comfortably for everyone. Asean is not, and should not be, the only expression of international relations in Southeast Asia. New associations with appropriate ways of working are needed to address transnational issues like climate change, building strong communities, and operating other non-security arrangements.

In the end, it is the worthy leaders of Southeast Asia who will embrace change, make history, and initiate new movements.

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