



At the launch of the book, *Fifty Years Of Asean And Singapore*, yesterday were Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan and the book's co-editors (from left) former IPS deputy director Chang Li Lin, Professor Tommy Koh and Ms Sharon Seah of NUS' Centre for International Law. ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR

# Asean must 'benefit citizens to succeed'

**Future success of regional grouping hinges on it bringing tangible benefits to citizens of its nations: Tommy Koh**

**Charissa Yong**

The success of Asean in the next 50 years hinges on it bringing tangible benefits to the 630 million citizens of its member nations, said Ambassador-at-Large Tommy Koh yesterday.

He was speaking at the Asean Day

reception to mark the regional grouping's 50th year, where he also launched a book titled *Fifty Years Of Asean And Singapore*.

The collection of essays was written by diplomats, government officials, academics and civil society representatives who were involved in Singapore's Asean efforts.

Professor Koh had made a similar

point in the book, cautioning that "Asean should not be seen by our people as an elitist organisation serving the interests of the urban elite and of big businesses".

At the reception, the retired diplomat gave a short speech on the achievements of the grouping in its last 50 years, and on how it can continue to succeed in its next 50.

Asean's 50th anniversary is worth celebrating for three reasons, he said.

First, Asean has enabled its 10 member economies to grow and

prosper, and to integrate into a single Asean Economic Community, with the eventual aim of having a single market and production base.

Second, the grouping has been a force for peace in the region, bringing together all the regional countries, the major powers and other stakeholders, both economically and politically, he said.

Third, Asean plays an indispensable role of being the convener and mutual chairman of important institutions and forums, such as the East Asia Summit.

But Asean cannot rest on its laurels and must constantly reinvent itself to stay relevant and competitive in a world facing technological revolution, said Prof Koh.

"The future of Asean depends very much on whether we are able to maintain our unity, independence and neutrality," he added.

Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, who was the guest of honour at the reception, said Asean's founding fathers had recognised that this spirit of unity would allow their countries to grow and prosper.

But being part of Asean means countries must not think only of national interests, but also posit them against regional interests, he said.

"We must accept that regional existence sometimes means painful adjustments from just thinking in our national hat, within our respective countries," he added. "We are still going to need this spirit to ensure that Asean remains united, credible and relevant in the next 50 years."

Both Dr Balakrishnan and Prof Koh said that Singapore's future is inextricably intertwined with Asean's, and noted that Singapore will chair Asean next year.

Dr Balakrishnan thanked Prof Koh and his co-editors for highlighting the efforts of Singapore's pioneers at making Asean a success.

The two other editors are Ms Sharon Seah, associate director of the National University of Singapore's Centre for International Law, and former Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Chang Li Lin.

Said Prof Koh: "We wanted to use this book to explain to fellow Singaporeans why Asean is important to Singapore."

The book is being sold at all major bookstores at \$98 for the hard-cover edition and \$38 for the paperback edition, excluding GST.

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