

S.E.A.View

Enhancing the Asean-ness of Asean citizens

The regional grouping turns 50 this year, but the concept of one community could be further enhanced by giving its 'citizens' more benefits.

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For *The Straits Times*

The designation of the region of South-east Asia as the "lands below the winds" was first recorded in the book, *The Ship Of Sulaiman*, by Muhammad ibn Ibrahim in 1668.

The phrase was then borrowed and popularised by Anthony Reid after he gave his magnum opus the title of *Southeast Asia In The Age Of Commerce 1450-1680: The Lands Below The Winds*.

Three centuries later, five relatively new independent nation

states - Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and the Philippines - all of which lie "below the winds", declared their intention to set up a supra national institution that was named the Association of South-east Asian Nations, or Asean.

This year marks the golden jubilee anniversary of Asean, the seventh-largest economy in the world and home to nearly 9 per cent of the population.

This regional grouping has been successful in bringing peace, stability and prosperity despite the fact that the initiative was established in the midst of the geopolitical tension of the Cold War. As well, its nation founders were still coping with the impact of

colonialism and imperialism. Today, Asean has doubled its membership, which now includes Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar. Within the half-century journey of regional cooperation, Asean has become more ambitious in transforming its diverse region into a single market, or Asean Economic Community (AEC). Inspired by the European Union, the AEC aims to create free mobility of goods, services, capital and skilled labour.

Despite Asean's remarkable attainments and ambitious future organisational superstructure, its creation as a regional community has been far from satisfactory.

For five decades, the formation process of Asean has been characterised as elitist, where public involvement has been minimal, relying instead on engagement at the state level.

This has led to a situation where the "Asean-ness" of its citizens has not been strongly established.

The key to this involves two aspects: the need for awareness, and participation. While awareness indicates knowledge about neighbouring countries and regional institutions, participation involves public engagement in a people-oriented Asean.

Forging "Asean-ness" is undeniably a challenge, as Asean society is a plural one. South-east Asia is home to thousands of ethnic groups that are extremely diverse in terms of linguistics, religion, history and cultural practices.

GIVE MEMBERSHIP SOME PRIVILEGES

Given this high degree of plurality, Asean should focus on promoting itself as one community by celebrating Asean as rich in heritage, cultural practices and religious traditions that make it unique and distinctive.

For that, the regional community building process should take into consideration two aspects:

boosting public involvement, and offering privileges to South-east Asian "citizens".

The former provides a platform for all South-east Asian citizens to build a sense of togetherness, while the latter enhances the sense of Asean ownership through the nature of a sense of "citizenship".

For a long time, the concept of Asean citizenship has been left untouched. However, it could be a powerful, symbolic institution to interconnect and integrate the region with the people. By mobilising the notion of citizenship, South-east Asian citizens should be able to gain certain benefits meaningful to them.

If there are no tangible social privileges, South-east Asians may just conceive of the regional institution as state-based, with few rights and entitlements for its people, many of whom are constantly on the move. A heartening example is Singapore, which charges Asean citizens lower

school fees than non-Asean foreigners.

This example illustrates what the Asean entity can do more of. Unfortunately, such privileges are still in their infancy. The free visa enabling Asean citizens to visit other member states is not something exclusive, as Asean countries also grant free visas to non-Asean nationals as a way to promote tourism.

Asean's mantra is "One vision, one identity, one community", but currently the daunting task is that its future depends on the willingness of each state to include Asean citizens within its national boundaries.

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S.E.A. View is a weekly column on South-east Asian affairs.



A ballet performance at the opening ceremony of the 31st Asean Summit in Manila on Nov 13. By mobilising the notion of citizenship, South-east Asian citizens should be able to gain certain benefits meaningful to them, says the writer. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE