

## COLLECTIVE-BASED IDENTITY

# BOOSTING ASEAN'S STATURE IN PIVOT TO REGIONAL DEMOCRACY



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Asean's position in the world order has to be recalibrated to enable the voices of its 622 million population to be clearly heard

**T**HE recent meet-up among Asean leaders (namely foreign ministers) in Bangkok represented an opportunity for the countries to consolidate regional matters and, more importantly, solidify regional diplomacy.

Recurring issues such as security, immigration, human rights, defence and bilateral relations took centre stage. But this time around, it took an interesting turn as Asean nations openly voiced their displeasure on the presence of Chinese warships in the region.

It is, however, refreshing to witness a vocal, independent and unbiased stand projected by Asean leaders. As articulated by Foreign Minister Datuk Saifuddin Abdullah, the world should take note of Asean's growing influence in the global order.

Democratic reforms are happening in Southeast Asia, and this signifies the broadening sense of democratic voice and courage to speak out for the best interest of the region. The projected air of confidence is a reflection of public opinion throughout Asean, as the population seeks to chart alternative ways towards socioeconomic growth and sustainability.

Two Asean countries (Indonesia and Thailand) just concluded their elections, paving the way for fresh appointments in each government. If Malaysia is included, we can observe the continuous democratic expansion within Asean.

Electorates are given the freedom to field and choose candidates according to their liking. In Indonesia for example, presidential candidates were evaluated via policy ideas and debates which were broadcast nationally.

Media channels were optimally used to provide transparent, real-time updates on the latest news impacting an entire country. And



South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-hwa at the 9th East Asia Summit Foreign Ministers' Meeting held on the sidelines of the 52nd Asean Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Bangkok on Aug 2. Asean must step up and be seen as the champion of Southeast Asia. EPA PIC

social media platforms were not barred, allowing users to freely share relevant information or even gossips associated with political developments.

Not to mention, a significantly large number of forums, conferences and discourses of Asean's direction have been conducted across the region, showcasing the inclusivity and level of participation among the Asean population to spur the region's reputation.

Of course, there are imperfections in varying degrees. Despite being recognised as one of the most stable regional alliances in the world, the Asean region is still grappling with human rights violations, maritime and ground security in bordering areas, immigration control and socioeconomic structure.

The resolution of such issues requires close cooperation and communication between the regional neighbours, integrity in governing each individual country and the need to strategise Asean's long-term approach according to a common vision and goal. This may take us years, but it needs to be adamantly pursued.

At a time where various regional alliances are facing their own respective challenges, Asean

must step up and be seen as the champion of the developing region of Southeast Asia.

We have to recalibrate Asean's position in the world order due to our strategic geopolitical importance. In a region of 622 million people (or roughly 10 per cent of the entire global population), Asean members must step out of their comfort zone and make themselves heard.

As a start, regional bedrock (Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia) should help the progress of democracy in fellow Asean nations.

The education aspect, complemented by structural reforms, should boost the projection of public issues and eventually help the lesser countries emerge as growing nations by adequately optimising their resources and nurturing valuable talents.

This process, as lengthy as it may be, should be spearheaded by Asean countries themselves. Outside interference must be avoided as we seek to grow from our shells and develop a strong sense of regional identity.

Thus, democratic engagements with fellow Asian and continental neighbours could probably be kept on a certain thresh-

old. Taiwan's new Southbound Policy for instance, may be used as a guide to nourish Asean's democracy along the regional spectrum, yet should be minimally considered in Asean's own exploration of democratic ideals as we manage continental relations with care.

Given the implications and development of the ongoing US-China trade war, surely Asean countries must make their stand in order to avoid a spillover effect, particularly at the security level.

But most of all, the battle of the superpowers should act as a reminder for Asean nations that it is imperative for us to forge a close-knit, collective-based identity in ensuring our region remains free from external encroachment.

Asean's quest towards building regional democracy may have started 51 years ago, but to sustain and move it forward it must be grounded by its own model of a holistic and democratic region.

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