

## **CHALLENGES TO THE ASEAN WAY: MUSYAWARAH AND NON-INTERFERENCE**

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*Rencana ini membincangkan perkembangan teknik pengurusan konflik dalam Pertubuhan Negara-negara Asia Tenggara (ASEAN). Tumpuan diberikan kepada perkembangan "Cara ASEAN" atau "ASEAN Way" yang melibatkan dua konsep utama iaitu "musyawarah" dan polisi tidak campurtangan dalam urusan domestik negara anggota. "Cara ASEAN" ini dipengaruhi oleh senario dan perkembangan politik serantau dan dunia dari tahun-tahun enam puluhan hinggalah sekarang ini. "Cara" ini juga dipengaruhi oleh budaya masyarakat serantau dan juga elit yang memerintah terutama semasa ASEAN baru ditubuhkan dulu. Kaedah yang digunakan ini bertujuan untuk mengekalkan hubungan yang baik dengan negara anggota yang lain. Hubungan yang baik ini akan membolehkan negara anggota menumpukan perhatian kepada masalah lain seperti usaha untuk membangunkan negara umpamanya dan tidak kepada masalah antara negara. Kaedah ini juga bertujuan memastikan stabiliti serantau dapat dikekalkan. Ini dapat memastikan kuasa-kuasa besar dari luar tidak campurtangan dalam urusan politik serantau. Walau bagaimanapun, kaedah pengurusan konflik "Cara ASEAN" ini telah dapat banyak tentangan kerana dikatakan tidak membantu menyelesaikan masalah di rantau ini, terutama dalam-dalam tahun-tahun sembilan puluhan yang menyaksikan pelbagai masalah baru timbul. Dalam ASEAN sendiri terdapat usaha untuk meluaskan skop pengurusan konflik ASEAN sejajar dengan masalah-masalah baru yang telah dan bakal timbul. Namun begitu, "Cara ASEAN" ini masih dilihat oleh kebanyakan pemimpin ASEAN sebagai mampu untuk menguruskan konflik di rantau ini dan mereka agak keberatan untuk menukarkannya dengan kaedah yang lebih baru dan formal.*

## **MUSYAWARAH – STYLE AND SUBSTANCE**

Regional cooperation has assumed a new dimension in Southeast Asia since the first collaborative framework was established in 1967. From the shadows of the second Indochina war to the full glare of Timorese independence, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN, has witnessed a region

characterised by big power involvement, domestic insurgency and, for a second time, United Nations administration and peacekeeping activity. Despite ASEAN's three-plus decades of continuity as a regional grouping, its style and substance has seen changes over time and may face new challenges over complex issues. Leadership succession at the national level may also affect the regional process. The changing dimension of dissonance and conflict may need fresh responses to strengthen the foundation if it is to be an effective regional actor.

ASEAN, a loosely constituted organisation, was set up to facilitate political communication to ensure domestic as well as regional stability, and to provide collective strength vis-a-vis external actors. However, its needs for inter-state cooperation were outwardly framed in economic and socio-cultural intentions. Despite its aims, both hidden and explicit, the grouping was slow in adopting specific economic or political programs until the 1990's. Its "sacred" philosophy - the "ASEAN Way" - ensured that regional cooperation was not rushed. While promoting consensus and amicable behaviour, it also subdued open discussion of issues, taking the cue from the notion of "musyawarah", and "mufakat", familiar to the Southeast Asian setting.<sup>1</sup>

This article reviews the "ASEAN Way" and explores its place at the crossroads clouded by changes and higher expectations of regional cooperation in view of the demands of transparent borders and rapid socio-economic development.

### **"THE ASEAN WAY"**

The characteristic manner in which the first generation ASEAN leaders nurtured and guided the regional grouping was responsible for instilling "the ASEAN Way". It referred to a noncommittal form of conflict management (based on inter personal contact and dialogue) that was deemed vital in the early decades of regional cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Member countries tried to be at their best behaviour towards each other. They were content to work at the minimum acceptable level of cooperation if it otherwise upsets the bilateral and regional status quo, or if it clashed with their domestic interests. Cooperation was not pushed to its optimal level for fear it would impinge on the ASEAN Way and

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of the terms, see Thambipillai and Saravanamuttu, (1985).

<sup>2</sup> For an insight into the geopolitics of the sixties and seventies, see Fifield (1979). For a general background to the political background of ASEAN, see Antolik (1990).

the clash of interests could ruin the ASEAN spirit.<sup>3</sup>

The "ASEAN Way" has inherited a mythical component; it is everything about ASEAN and nothing in particular; a reference point for an intangible character, nuance, style, norm and regional law and regime all encompassed in one; a concept as pervasive and slippery as the "Asian Values" concept.<sup>4</sup> Naturally there are as many definitions as there are perceptions of the aims underlying ASEAN modes of cooperation. But according to political leaders who speak its merits, it has worked. How and why?

It was intended, based on the prevailing geopolitics of 1967, that regional institutions and regional identity would evolve gradually and could not be imposed at will (on a grouping that was not yet ready to shed its deep rooted bilateral uneasiness). To maintain stable relationships, a non-conflicting process was needed, one that would manage the common interests congenially. Convergence of interests was good, but divergence was also possible if it was not openly emphasised or harmed the public intentions of the group. Therein lay the vantage points for the "ASEAN Way"; it tried to overcome the existing less-than-perfect political atmosphere between members by considering the positive aspects.

It was the politics of cooperation and the prudence of avoidance that underscored the early years of regionalism in ASEAN. Over the decades the "ASEAN Way" has expanded to cover areas from decision-making styles to specific policy areas for inclusion or exclusion. Above that was the avowed practice of non-interference in each other state's internal affairs. Any comment on another's domestic issues was the ultimate sign of disapproval in the ASEAN code of conduct and not in keeping with the "ASEAN Way".

### Consensus Building

ASEAN was not unique in adopting the consensus model in decision-making - an adaptation of "musyawarah" - that is, decision making through discussion and consultation. The process may take longer than that practiced in other (legalistic) international organisations as there is a vital need to sustain regional

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<sup>3</sup> Hadi Soesastro of CSIS, Jakarta, lists twelve core principles of the ASEAN Way, as quoted by Zakaria (1997). Other studies include Mak (1997), Acharya (1997).

<sup>4</sup> The "Asian Values" started a partisan discussion between academics and politicians in the 'east' and those in the 'west', resulting in numerous publications on related topics. An enjoyable piece of reading is by Sheridan (1999).

harmony (read: leadership harmony) in the absence of rules and procedures. The need to uphold outward unity and friendliness is of prime concern: the 'we' (united, agreeable) against the 'them' (outsiders, out to destabilise us). Thus an intimate process of negotiation and musyawarah was necessary to arrive at an acceptable outcome – 'mufakat' – without clearly revealing the extent of the division, which formalised balloting would do. However, to the uninitiated observer it may provide an unnatural sense of stability, indicating mutual support amongst the participants; in fact, it may be exactly what the grouping wishes to portray.

In short, ASEAN succumbed to the prolonged way of decision making, not addressing issues directly and openly; the process tried to accommodate varying opinions by engaging in a 'saving face' ritual. ASEAN was concerned with emphasising the process more than the substance of cooperation as the meager end results seemed to support.

A modified version of the consensus model was proposed by Singapore's former premier Lee Kuan Yew to nudge forward the regional process, without dampening by any specific policy as a result of disagreement from a member. Hence the 'five-minus-one model' (referring to the original five). That allowed a measure of identity to the process; for example, it would be clear which country did not participate in a specific area, but would not object to the others pursuing it while it excluded itself. (Thambipillai and Saravanamuttu, 1985:22)

Consensus building was very important to a grouping that was not yet confident of its bilateral or collective relations. ASEAN was created to contain and gradually override members' regional hostilities. Non-confrontational decision making was a key component to laying the foundation for a long-term regional cooperation. Sensitive bilateral relations (for example, issues that clouded ties between Malaysia-Singapore, Malaysia-Indonesia, or Indonesia-Singapore) were partially overcome through regional accommodation within the ASEAN framework; it allowed diplomacy and communications to gradually overcome outstanding issues.

The role of the first generation leaders was crucial in setting the tone for the "ASEAN Way", having experienced the political traumas of regional relations. Consequently, personal ties became a key component in regionalism, created through conscious effort by those concerned. The first echelon foreign ministers, more than anyone else, were the guardians of the "ASEAN Way". A comfortable network of interactions had to be established before their executive leadership enjoyed the same privilege and which could be carried on by succeeding generations of leaders. The fact that most national leaders remained in office for a long time helped to cement the ties through the "ASEAN Way".

### Selection of Issues

ASEAN was born of a simple declaration, modest in its goals and realistic in its expectations. It noted the desire to “establish a firm foundation for common action to promote regional cooperation ... in the spirit of equality and partnership and thereby contribute towards peace, progress and prosperity in the region.” While social and economic development was the focus, a climate of ‘good understanding’ and ‘good neighbourliness’ were the essence of cooperation. Thus issues per se were secondary to the need to strengthen regional bonds. Issues of common interest were selected according to the level of agreement there was; issues considered ‘sensitive’ were excluded. The explanation of ‘sensitive’ was relative, left undefined, but somehow understood to refer to issues that would create negative feelings among the participating members.

Thus the “ASEAN Way” came to symbolise exclusion of disagreeable but perhaps important regional issues, and the inclusion of commonly acceptable and non-controversial ones, chosen of course by a handful of elites. The decision on common industrial projects in the late seventies gave rise to the first indications that it was alright to disagree, but in the “ASEAN Way”.<sup>5</sup>

### Non Antagonism

While conciliatory politics, domestic and regional security and a strong anti communist domestic policy were the hallmark of the first generation ASEAN governments, they did not project a common policy against the communist states of Southeast Asia. The projection of the group was clearly to be non-communist and to be free of western dominance, that all foreign bases in the region were temporary or remained with the approval of the countries concerned. Therefore the organisation was open to the participation of all Southeast Asian states which subscribed to their expressed ideals. (As stated in the ASEAN Declaration, 1967, and in the Declaration on the Zone of Peace Freedom and Neutrality, ZOPFAN, 1971).

The “ASEAN Way” allowed the states to outwardly profess a certain political stand, but privately each country could practice as strict a regime as it deemed possible in eliminating any traces of communism or other forms of ‘anti government’ activities, or seek developed countries’ assistance in economic and security areas. In short, ASEAN leaders sought to accommodate intra regional

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<sup>5</sup> The ASEAN Industrial Projects and other areas of cooperation in the early years of the group are discussed by Suriayamongkol (1988).

cooperation and accept their extra regional differences; for example, in projecting a friendly attitude towards the states in Indochina in the mid seventies or accepting aid from the developed countries. The need to project the right impressions and friendly signals were important aspects of the ASEAN Way. In establishing the credentials of an infant organisation, it was necessary to be seen as indigenous and as exclusive as possible, while individually practising acceptable variations.

### Process as Crucial

The lack of institutionalisation of regional cooperation was another means of strengthening interaction step by step. During the initial ten years there was no central organ; the 'structure' consisted of regularised meetings. The national secretariats at the foreign ministries were the coordinators for each member country, with no intrusion or control from a supra national body. Even after the secretariat was set up in Jakarta in 1976, the latter was assigned the role of a 'registry', coordinating but not initiating, while national leaders and foreign ministers continued to steer regional, including functional, cooperation. Only after some changes were instituted at the 1992 ASEAN Summit, was the secretariat accorded a more visible and proactive (especially functional), role and the secretary general's post granted a ministerial status.

ASEAN had settled on a non-legalistic mode of operation; the leaders felt more comfortable with declarations rather than treaties. The mechanism rather than the mechanics/structure characterised the "ASEAN Way". The process of cooperation was itself important; the structures were secondary if the goals could still be met.

### **CHANGE AND CHALLENGE**

Change in any organisation is inevitable; ASEAN could not drift along, adjusting only when a swell jolted it (for example the unification of Vietnam in 1975 or the invasion of Cambodia in 1978). The eighties and nineties witnessed more dramatic changes in political and economic developments at home and abroad. (For instance, the Philippine political developments of 1986; disintegration of the Soviet Union and 1990's post cold war.) They left repercussions on the Southeast Asian grouping, its momentum and process of regional cooperation.

National leadership changes also had a major effect. Those who had spun the network of linkages through a slow and dedicated process had left. The next group, including the heads of governments and the foreign ministers inherited

the spirit of cooperation and adapted to the prevailing system; (the exception was former Indonesian President, Suharto, who had witnessed ASEAN from its inception until 1998, and former Singaporean Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew who was head of government till 1990 and then remained as senior minister.) The second echelon leaders, and especially those after them, were not constrained by their predecessors' perceptions of regionalism. The successive ASEAN leaders were keen to expand regional activities and external linkages. Slowly the "ASEAN Way" appeared to be compromised, (in some instances), while pragmatism crept in, only if it meant more national gains (for instance, in functional areas), or in certain foreign policies (for example, in the Cambodian conflict from 1979 that dragged on for a decade, and the more rapid extension of partnership to regional foe Vietnam after 1990), as ASEAN expanded its goals of cooperation.

The phenomenal growth rates and industrialisation strategies had encouraged member countries to seek specific agendas for economic cooperation. Attempts at free trade area, and other common policies had to be negotiated in tandem with national objectives. By the early 1990s there was general agreement to achieve a regional free trade area, beyond the slow moving preferential trading arrangement that had been in effect in the 70's and 80's which had only achieved partial success. For the ever-increasing regional meetings participated by younger technocrats and bureaucrats, traditional modes of behavior were not conducive for functional cooperation to proceed.

As economic development created a vocal middle class with rising expectations, the demands on the traditional 'secretive' style of behavior had to give way to a more exposed process. As more and more issues were included for regional consideration, the number of individuals involved also increased. Hence, the special status of a handful of ASEAN leaders huddled together away from the prying eyes of the media or of their concerned population began to fade. The carefully worded post-ministerial declarations and statements were supplemented by 'live' press conferences in line with forging a positive image of cooperation.

## **STRUCTURAL IMPACT**

In addition to internal calls for changes, new macro regional initiatives, like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC, 1989) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, 1994), necessitated transparency and confidence building through shared information, be it in security or finance or trade. The "ASEAN Way" was unconsciously being eroded through the passage of time and the changing nature of the global and regional environment. Undoubtedly there were vast

differences in ASEAN members' approach to economic issues under APEC, and more complex issues under the ARF framework - a dialogue process exploring security for the larger region.

The widening and deepening of ASEAN (though not to the extent of the European Union) had a major impact on the status quo. For an organisation that did not see any membership change since 1984, it saw rapid additions, in 1995, followed by another two in 1997 and final one in 1999. Not only did it signify the desire to expand the membership to encompass the entire Southeast Asia, it also meant the accommodation of different ideologies and political systems quite distinct from the first group. The accession of Vietnam and Laos, in 1992, to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and the admission of the first communist state, Vietnam, in 1995, were bold directions. Besides, only a few years earlier (from 1979-1989), Vietnam had been ASEAN's adversary when it invaded Cambodia and assisted its allies in setting up a government. Perhaps, 1992 will remain as a watershed in the political development of a twenty-five years old grouping in Southeast Asia when ASEAN relaxed its rules for collaboration.

Changes in the levels of political acceptability has altered some of the long-standing traditions and transformed the political canvas that had to incorporate various interests. Inclusion of Myanmar in 1997 has pitted ASEAN against foreign parties accusing ASEAN of not taking a strong stand on human rights issues there. A perturbed ASEAN has had to defend its decisions on Myanmar, while explaining its 'disinterest' in that country's domestic politics.

Perhaps the greatest impact on ASEAN was the economic turmoil of 1997/98 that caused member states to downgrade ASEAN collective approach and concentrate on domestic priorities.<sup>6</sup> Economic nationalism at times created bilateral tensions, for example, between Malaysia and Singapore, while economic displacement in several states threatened regional social and political stability. Domestic politics and violence in Cambodia in mid 1997 tested ASEAN's so-called collective style in facing regional issues; initially no collective policy or action was adopted in facing the prospective member's domestic situation. Another major issue that had challenged the "ASEAN Way" was domestic political change in Indonesia, the largest and most influential member of ASEAN, and its East Timor independence and Aceh's struggle for separation.

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<sup>6</sup> See for example the views of Zakaria and Ghosal (1999); Acharya (1999).



## **NON-INTERFERENCE**

The United Nations Charter (1945) has laid down the principles for international interaction, on the respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference. ASEAN incorporated similar elements in its initiating declaration (1967), in the Zone of Peace Freedom and Neutrality, ZOPFAN (1971) and more specifically in the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, TAC (1976). TAC symbolises the special nature of ASEAN diplomacy, and ASEAN expects others to respect that policy as well.

TAC has a special significance in the annals of ASEAN. It represented the culmination of ten years of progress that led to the first summit of heads of government; it was also the first treaty ever signed by the group, one of only two that relates to the political and security aspects of regional relationship.<sup>7</sup> Thus TAC explicitly laid down the perimeters of behaviour that would guide inter state relationships within Southeast Asia. It was based on mutual respect, equality and non-interference in the internal affairs of one another. It was signed by the original five in 1976, but was open for accession by other states of Southeast Asia (that saw accession by Papua New Guinea the following year, and Brunei Darussalam - when it joined the organisation).

The original domain of TAC has expanded to include neighbours (Papua New Guinea had been accorded special observer status in ASEAN) and then other Southeast Asian states (Vietnam, Laos) by when it was evident that being a signatory was a prelude to being considered for membership and thus Myanmar and Cambodia were the next to accede to it. ASEAN had also invited more countries to accept the Treaty; a Protocol amending TAC signed in 1987 denoted states outside Southeast Asia could accede to the treaty with the consent of the original signatories; but to date, there has been no outside interest to accept the TAC offer.

ASEAN members have abided by the 'rules' of non-interference, even if it meant refraining from committing to broader issues of humanitarianism and human rights. The argument has been 'do unto others what you want them to do unto you'; that is, 'do not interfere in our affairs and we will not interfere in yours'. Proponents of TAC and non-interference assure that it considers bilateral sensitivity and promotes harmony. However, as ASEAN became more active since the nineties, those within and outside the region expected the grouping to respond to or at the least voice concern over certain issues. The

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<sup>7</sup> The other being the Treaty on the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone, signed in Bangkok during the Summit in 1995.

majority of the leaders steadfastly stood by the self imposed rule, offering no concern or negative comments as laid down by the agreed principle; more importantly, there were to be no discussion on issues afflicting another member state, especially through the media.

## **INTERVENTION OR CONSTRUCTIVE ENGAGEMENT?**

ASEAN leaders have occasionally generated diverse views, but none as controversial as the one on 'interference' which went against the grain of the ASEAN Way. Myanmar, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia, for example, have at times invited comments that would not be considered 'ethical' according to the regional code of conduct, especially if they originated from fellow national leaders.<sup>8</sup>

Commentaries on the need to reconsider the term, non-interference, came from ASEAN's influential elites. For instance, in 1997, Yusuf Wanandi (Chairman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Jakarta) commented on the need to cautiously examine the principle with regards to Myanmar.<sup>9</sup> The most forceful contribution came from the new foreign minister of Thailand, Surin Pitsuwan, in 1998. He argued that the non-interference principle should be discarded in favour of 'constructive intervention', if another country's policies had grave impact on its own domestic concerns. He was referring in part to the specific bilateral situation between Thailand and Myanmar, for long plagued by border problems. The idea, perceived as 'radical', generated heated debate on the concept, later toned down to 'constructive engagement'. Surin Pitsuwan further expounded his ideas at the 1998 Annual Foreign Ministers Meeting where there was little forthright support from the other foreign ministers.<sup>10</sup> The term was later modified into 'flexible engagement'. Thailand (Surin Pitsuwan, in particular) and the Philippines (under President Estrada) have been the two explicitly in favour of such a collective policy. Most of the other leaders have been either non-committed or opposed to it.

What is the value of a concept unless duly applicable? The August 1999 East Timor referendum on autonomy/independence (and events dating back to earlier

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<sup>8</sup> An instance where it stirred reactions from Malaysia were the comments of (former) Filipino President Estrada on issues related to the former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim who had been arrested and later jailed for misconduct.

<sup>9</sup> Wanandi (1997:34).

<sup>10</sup> See Surin Pitsuwan's Opening Statement at the ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting held in Manila, 24 July, 1998. Also, Buszynski (1998).

years when there was violence and loss of lives there) are familiar to those who have seen the non-interference principle followed to the word. The “ASEAN Way” was criticised by some of its own citizens for not initiating any collective policy toward Timor, but the standard reaction was that it was Indonesia’s internal problem. Besides, some of the ASEAN states were cautious of potential problems in their own territories and would not comment publicly at their neighbours for fear of not only ‘upsetting’ them, but also unleashing demands at home. It is not infrequent that ASEAN countries have been accused of ignoring human rights and environmental issues - areas of activities where ASEAN could offer a large contribution if it wishes to be an effective regional player.

### **CONFLICT MANAGEMENT – THE “ASEAN WAY”**

ASEAN members have several outstanding bilateral issues including territorial claims. However they have contained them without resorting to violence. Since 1968 (when there was tension between Malaysia and the Philippines over the latter’s Sabah claim), there has been no break in diplomatic relations. Verbal accusations have led to reductions in certain bilateral interactions. The numerous meetings and summits have contributed in a positive manner to overriding certain sensitive hiccups that affect interactions. Thus the “ASEAN Way” has inculcated a deep-seated concern for the process of regional cooperation (and the need to maintain existing ties), even if policy outcomes are delayed. Communication and the existence of various interactive channels at different levels of hierarchy, have an in built protective valve that has prevented extreme reactions.<sup>11</sup>

A peaceful Southeast Asia has been a prime concern since the establishment of ASEAN. The concept of security community, as developed by Karl Deutsch in his study of Western Europe in the late 1950’s, refers to a regional environment influenced by peace and expectations of non-violent settlement of disputes. The notion of the security community may be applicable to the ASEAN setting to some extent. In fact, a diplomatic community appears to be a more appropriate term that underscores the “ASEAN Way”, given the fact that hundreds of meetings are held yearly with adequate opportunity for the elites to socialise.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> For a study of some of the means available in solving problems the ASEAN way, see Cabellero-Anthony (1998) and Hoang (1996).

<sup>12</sup> For critical assessment of the ASEAN process see, Leifer (1999) and Cotton (1999).

A significant aspect of regional problem solving is that members prefer a bilateral to a collective approach. The bilateral method allows each to explore the best possible strategy to adopt, without having to abide by a third party decision. Only the parties involved would be the best judges, according to that formula. Also it allows more discretion and quiet. Perhaps that explains why the proposal for a High Council did not find much support within ASEAN. The TAC had proposed that to settle disputes through the regional process, a High Council should be established comprising members, so that there would be a continuing body to address issues brought before it.

The closest institution to the High Council was the three member committee or 'troika' that was established to study the admission of Cambodia after domestic political instability ended in a coup by Hun Sen against his co-prime minister Ranaridh in mid-1997. The domestic violence effectively denied any chances for Cambodia's entry into ASEAN. (ASEAN had planned a group admission of the three - Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar - on its 30th anniversary). The troika, made up of the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, was responsible for ensuring that Cambodia met certain criterion of acceptability, (for instance, holding general elections, and the setting up of a two-chamber parliament). The troika's mission eventually proved fruitful and Cambodia was admitted in April 1999.

The Informal ASEAN Summit of November 1999 again deliberated the issue of 'engagement' and supported its application within the context of the "ASEAN Way". A proposal for a permanent troika, similar to the Cambodian troika was discussed. The new proposal states that the three foreign ministers, from the past, current and next chairmen of the standing committees, offer to mediate in an issue if invited by the member concerned. If implemented, it would offer a more institutionalised approach to conflict management within the ASEAN context.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

ASEAN has been addressing several common issues affecting economic, environment, health and other social issues. However, it is clear that care has been exercised in issues of a political nature. There is caution that cases of separatism, for example, in Aceh or Mindanao, may implicate certain ASEAN neighbours. Establishment elites support their counterparts in other governments. However, issues like Aceh or Mindanao, which are nearer to the geographical heartland of ASEAN and relate to the majority of ASEAN's population, may pose a problem, unlike the East Timor, where, for years there was little interest or involvement by ASEAN government circles beyond a few civic groups.

Consensus building and the need for “musyawarah” will remain, but in certain areas only, specifically in political issues. It is still seen as an important component within the ASEAN community. It provides the strength of unity for the Southeast Asian states, the majority of whom are considered small or weak. The “ASEAN Way” provides an ‘insurance’ against their bigger members. It is also appreciated by the newer members as it provides them an avenue for regional participation. It also assures a place for the silent minority within the grouping.

However, as development takes on an increasingly faster pace, the traditional forms of “musyawarah” and ‘shadow play’ will be transformed by newer players on the scene who may adopt more direct or provocative means. ASEAN has already witnessed emerging dissonance to the concept of non-interference; there will also be a need for more transparency and confidence building, involving not just the ASEAN elites but a wider cross-section of the society as well.

The “ASEAN Way” has been a trademark of the grouping, especially for the ASEAN six. With new member states, varied political systems, changing expectations and the new phenomenon of globalisation and the internet world, ASEAN will be seeking additional ways in addressing regional issues. It will need to pursue unconventional ways (for example the troika system) alongside its conventional, “ASEAN Way”, in settling conflicts. Speed and efficiency will also be essential in cooperation as incidents of regional haze and contagious disease have indicated. In addition, the future may see other changes as civil society becomes more prominent in ASEAN states; the small group of national elites may not have the sole role in deciding on important issues, including regional issues.

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