



Nationalism is not a barrier to achieving One Community of ASEAN

By *Cheng Ousa*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ASEAN is one of the most diverse regions in the world in which the member states do not share the same languages, cultural heritage, and political regimes. Fortunately, because of these differences, ASEAN is a unique entity in Southeast Asia.
- One of the goals of ASEAN is to fully integrate the member states and create the One Community of ASEAN. However, for the past 55 years, the process has been still slow. Many scholars believe that “nationalism” is the main hindrance to the One Community of ASEAN.
- This commentary will prove otherwise through three layers of analysis, arguing that “nationalism” does not limit ASEAN from achieving One Community of ASEAN. First, nationalism is a typical thing which citizens will undoubtedly have it. Second, nationalism cannot intervene in the way of working of ASEAN as ASEAN promotes the principle of consensus and non-interference. Third, nationalism promotes more cooperation among ASEAN as everyone wants benefits for their respective countries.
- Therefore, there are three practical solutions for ASEAN and its member states to walk toward One Community of ASEAN. First, it is to solve the problem of mistrust and discrimination among ASEAN people through people-to-people diplomacy. This bottom-up approach would help people with different cultures to understand each other better. Second, it is the ASEAN education which can help build a sense of belonging among the people. Third, it is to bring values and policies into practice as ASEAN has many good policies that have not been realized yet.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is an important regional organization for the Southeast Asian region. Despite the vast diversity among the member states, ASEAN has made considerable progress in integration. Although the road has been bumpy because of the differences between member states, external members, and the international environment, ASEAN does not stop evolving. Many scholars believe that one of the main reasons behind this slow progress is the idea of “nationalism” of each member state. However, this paper will prove otherwise with three layers of

analysis of how nationalism is not a barrier to the One Community of ASEAN by looking at the nature of nationalism, how it cannot influence the ASEAN decision-making body, and how it promotes cooperation.

ASEAN Community Building

Before moving on further, it is vital to understand the main motive behind the creation of ASEAN back in 1967. One of the most important factors for this establishment was to escape the spread of communism during the period of the Cold War. To present a "unified" front in the face of communist threats and to fend off "external interference", governments of individual member states in ASEAN would establish effective control over their domestic territories and concentrate on developing "national resilience".ⁱ The five founding fathers, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, knew the importance of collective effort as it was the best way to secure their countries' security.

The idea of "One Community of ASEAN" up to now is still in the process of exploring. ASEAN is not the same as the European Union (EU). By saying that ASEAN should follow the EU's footsteps, it is unfair as ASEAN is unique in its own way. Currently, One Community of ASEAN should have two characteristics, namely adopting diversity and accepting diversity. This would look like ASEAN member states are living together, working together, and growing together harmoniously. This is crucial as ASEAN is a regional community composed of a variety of dynamic power of small states and high-income states. According to the ASEAN official website, the realization of One ASEAN Community starts and ends with the ASEAN people, through adopting and accepting diversity.

Nationalism not a Barrier

By understanding what nationalism is, it would help us understand its relations to One Community of ASEAN better. Nationalism is a concept invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the principle 'that humanity is naturally divided into nations, that nation can be known by certain characteristics which can be ascertained, and that the only legitimate type of government is national self-government'.ⁱⁱ This nationalism in an anti-colonial context was prevalent in Southeast Asian nations throughout the colonial period.ⁱⁱⁱ Nation-building was therefore a priority for almost all of the new governments. Therefore, anti-colonial nationalism evolved into the nationalism of ethnic conflict in the current world. Now, nationalism is understood as self-determination in which states are protecting their autonomy and their benefits within the international environment.^{iv}

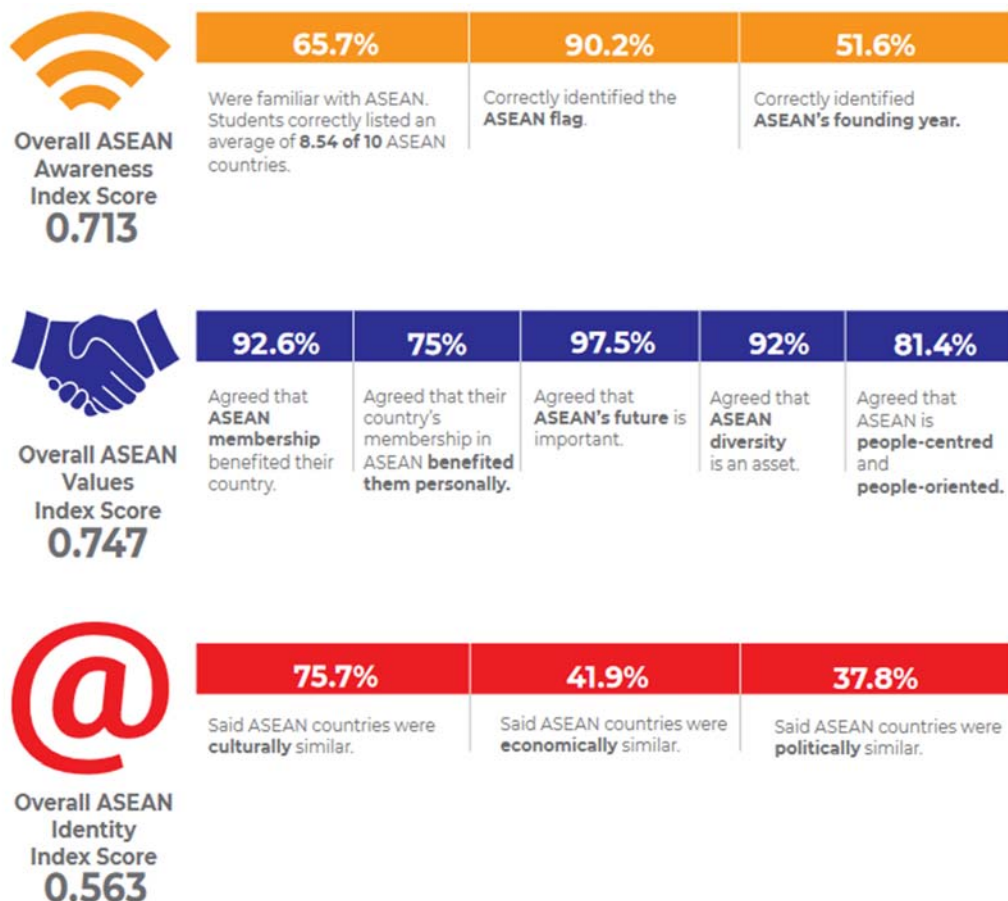
There are many types of Nationalism, and this paper focuses on two types, namely ethno-nationalism and civic nationalism as these two terms are always confused. Ethno-nationalism refers to a form of discrimination against other ethnicities. On the other hand, civic nationalism aims to capitalize on the reality, despite people's unwillingness to abandon their nationalist allegiances, that we can channel these sentiments toward non-violent civilized displays.^v

ASEAN people are more aware of ASEAN as an entity as shown in the figure below. ASEAN Awareness Index focuses on the familiarity, ASEAN Countries' names, flags, and foundation year of ASEAN. From the figure below, we can see considerable changes and improvement in how much ASEAN people know about ASEAN with a score of 0.713 out of 1.

Moreover, ASEAN Value Index focuses on the importance of ASEAN to each country with a sample of university students in ASEAN countries. The results showed that the majority of the students agreed that ASEAN is beneficial to their countries.

Furthermore, for ASEAN Identity Index, it is about the cultural diversity and differences among the nation in terms of three dimensions, namely culture, economics, and politics. This index has the least score compared to the other two indexes, showing that there is still a gap in the Identity of the ASEAN people. These indexes show us how people in ASEAN now have a positive prospect of these countries.

Figure 1: ASEAN Awareness Index, ASEAN Value Index, and ASEAN Identity Index



Source:

ASEAN Secretariat (2021). *Understanding how young people see ASEAN awareness, values and identity: Exploring the Fifth Domain of the ASEAN Youth Development Index.*

First and foremost, nationalism is a typical thing. It is inevitable. Everyone undoubtedly has it as it is part of the nature of the citizens in that country, and it is also their way of living.^{vii} Through interaction, tradition, norms, and cultural values, individuals are bounded to a certain country. It is an undeniable truth that one would love the country that they were born in and live in for a long time. Even when it comes to the social value, economic values, and political system of the country, most people seem to favour and support what is applied to their country.

Second, nationalism cannot interfere with the ASEAN way of working. ASEAN has its way of operation which includes the principle of non-interference and consensus. The principle of non-interference refers to the principle of not meddling in member states' internal affairs and respecting the independence and sovereignty of member states, which is clearly stated under Article 2 of the ASEAN Charter. Furthermore, ASEAN follows a principle of consensus in which the adoption and implementation of policy must be voted on and agreed “unanimously” by each member state. Therefore, even if Cambodian diplomats have strong nationalist values and want more benefits such as foreign direct investment or free trade agreements for Cambodia in the ASEAN meetings, this can only be done when all the ASEAN members agree. Therefore, it is impossible to influence ASEAN to only keep the benefits for only one country.

Third, by being nationalistic, all the member states in ASEAN want more advantages for their country. Instead of putting a barrier, nationalism would push for more innovation and initiatives. Knowing that it is impossible to ask for benefits for just one country, collective effort and collective benefits would rise. This is why ASEAN was able to expand from five members to 10 members, and from one dialogue partner to 11 dialogue partners with the United Kingdom as its latest partner.^{viii} In fact, nationalistic values further accelerate the ASEAN Economic Community, ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, and ASEAN Political-Security Community.

In the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), each country is nationalistic, meaning that they want more benefits for their countries and the region as well. For example, the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA), which was signed in 2009 in Thailand, seeks to promote free trade of goods throughout the region, lowering trade barriers and strengthening economic ties. In 2022, the ATIGA Upgrade Negotiations proposed by Cambodia were approved by the ASEAN ministers.^{ix} The enhanced negotiations are meant to ensure that ATIGA would make the region's economy more linked and cohesive, especially in the face of shocks and volatility in the global economy.^x This example shows how Cambodia is also willing to adopt and update what is proposed by Thailand, as long as there are benefits for Cambodia.

In the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC), ASEAN member states are collaborating to make cultural exchanges and understand more about inclusivity for the ASEAN people. For example, in accordance with a 2001 agreement, each ASEAN member will no longer require a visa to visit another nation.^{xi} This facilitative policy does not only promote the tourism sector in the member states but also promotes job opportunities, health care options, and investment among the members of ASEAN.



In the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC), there have been many updates and revisions to the APSC blueprint which shows the collaborative effort in making changes to fit with the context of the world. In early 2022, APSC Outlook Volume 4 - Revisiting ASEAN and ASEAN-led Mechanisms: Taking Stock and Thinking through ASEAN Secretariat - was published with the aims to promote community building, find solutions to different challenges, and highlight the ASEAN-led mechanisms.^{xii} Taken all of this information into consideration, we can see clearly how nationalism does not limit ASEAN from becoming a One Community.

Conclusion

As a way forward, there are several recommendations for ASEAN to walk toward One Community of ASEAN without having to eliminate nationalist values among the ASEAN people.

- First, ASEAN member states need to solve the problems of mistrust and discrimination which are the two key barriers to One Community by focusing on more discussion and dialogue toward a common goal. People-to-people diplomacy needs to be improved for different age groups of people so that we are building a sense of belonging. ASEAN Youth Debate 2022, co-organized by the National Youth Commission, the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), , and ASEAN, aimed to raise youth awareness, shape the policy-making process, and deepen people-to-people connectivity for ASEAN's vision. The benefits are two-fold. As ASEAN also has a strong establishment in terms of policies, connecting the people of ASEAN can promote civic nationalism and avoid ethno-nationalism. Nonetheless, this can promote mutual understanding and trust which are the main component of identity building.
- Second, there should be ASEAN-related subjects in the school curricula across the region in creating a common narrative and internalizing history to the people. This is crucial as one of the aspects that have resulted in ethno-nationalism is the way we understand and write the history of each country.^{xiii} It is impossible to change the past, and learning to appreciate the past is our new way of dealing with differences.
- Third, ASEAN needs to bring its policies and values into practice. There are many good policies drafted and adopted by ASEAN. Promoting ASEAN Centrality and multilateral cooperation where each member country can advance their national interests by working together through the ASEAN framework is where ASEAN can have harmony in the region. For example, ASEAN Human Right Declaration is one of the milestones in ASEAN that should be strongly embraced by the ASEAN countries and people.

In conclusion, ASEAN is a unique community that is very diverse in all aspects. However, it does not necessarily mean that the member states have to give up their own country's values to become ASEAN. In actuality, all people can have their own national identity with the ASEAN identity as a compliment. The fact that each member states have a genuine desire to establish a regional organization to promote

cooperation for mutual peace and prosperity is already a strong foundation for the organization to move forward. It is no doubt that ASEAN is walking slowly, but surely.

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