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Asean-Leaders

UNITY IN DIVERSITY, THE ASEAN WAY

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JAKARTA, Nov 28 (Bernama) -- Representing some of the oldest form of governments' from monarchy, democracy, socialism to military, leaders of the 10 Southeast Asian nations will meet here Saturday for a first-ever Asean Informal Summit.

The leaders, among them, a Sultan, a prince, retired generals and a doctor, are the heads of government from the seven Asean member states -- Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam -- and their counterparts from the two Indo-Chinese countries Cambodia and Laos as well as Myanmar.

This will be the second "reunion" for the leaders after the 1995 Asean Summit in Thailand. It was in Bangkok that the leaders decided they should meet regularly instead of just the triennial summit.

Home to nearly half-a-billion people, Southeast Asia is one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. Asean alone accounted for about US\$300 billion (about RM750 billion) in total exports last year.

Brunei, a rich oil sultanate, will be represented by the 50-year-old Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, the world's richest man, who is also a helicopter pilot.

Indonesia's President Suharto, 75, is one of the world's longest-serving leaders. The former army general became President in 1967 after an abortive coup against the late former President Sukarno.

Malaysia's Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is a medical doctor who became the country's fourth Prime Minister on July 16, 1981.

Philippines' President Fidel Ramos or "Eddie" (nickname), 68, is another former army general who played a vital role in the "people power" revolution that toppled the late President Ferdinand Marcos.

Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, 55, an economist, started his career as an administrative officer and rose to lead the island republic in 1991.

Another former general, who is expected to make his debut at the summit is newly-elected Thai Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. The former commander of Thailand's politically powerful military was sworn in last Monday.

Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet, 74, is the politburo member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam. He played a key role in reforming the Vietnam economy in late 1986.

Cambodia will be represented by co-Prime Ministers' Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen, 45, while Laos by Prime Minister Khamtay Siphandone, 72. The Laotian leader is already in town for an official visit.

Myanmar's Prime Minister General Than Shwe, 63, is chairman of the State Law and Order Restoration Council which rules Myanmar.

With the timing of Yangon's admission into the seven-member regional grouping remains a question, the summit would probably focus on the issue.

Malaysia is keen to get Myanmar as well as Cambodia and Laos into the Asean fold by next year when Kuala Lumpur hosts the annual ministerial meeting. Next year will mark Asean's 30th anniversary.

Most of the leaders would be accompanied by their respective foreign ministers although there would not be any meeting between the ministers prior to the informal summit at Jakarta Hilton. -- BERNAMA

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