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Taking stock of the Asean Way three decades later

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DISCUSSED at some length in a recent seminar in Bangkok was the Asean Way. Taking part were 30 journalists from the group's nine-member countries and also from Cambodia, the Asean member-in-waiting.

For those present it was an experience in self-criticism in the wake of the prolonged haze and the continuing currency turmoil. Published in The Nation, one of the Thai capital's English-language daily was a special article on "a summer of discontent throughout the region". It was written by a freelance Malaysian writer.

Touching off discussions on the topic of Integration of Asean: Trends, Opportunities and Challenges was Dr Termsak Chalermpananupap, former newspaper editor and presently a senior officer in the Asean Co-operation and Dialogue Relations in Jakarta.

Emphasised at the outset was the principle of political equality adhered to by all members and of consensus in their decision-making process. Quote: "Asean members have long learned to accept one another as political equals, and this principle of political equality will never be changed."

The rule of consensus does not, however, give any member a de facto power of veto. Inherent in the Asean Way is understanding of each other's special concerns, goodwill and co-operation among all, and practical flexibility. One example mentioned by Termsak is a ministerial meeting on rural development mooted by Malaysia. Singapore has no need for rural development, he added, and yet has given support for the move.

Nonetheless, the growing diversity with the entry of new members makes Asean interests and concerns more complex.

Touching off a debate was Pichai Chuensuksawadi, chief editor of the Bangkok Post, with a pinch of self-criticism over the tendency of journalists merely reporting what ministers and officials say. As a result they were unprepared for dramatic changes. "Like it or not, old and new members of Asean must change. The real challenge is how we report the impact of Asean on the lives of the ordinary people and not merely report what ministers say. An Asean consciousness would then evolve."

Economic issues were important for the integration of Asean and likewise the effect of decisions by such as Opec and other regional bodies.

Also criticising institutional reporting was Zainon Ahmad, managing editor of the New Straits Times, who spoke of changes already taking place. Newspapers were now sending their reporters here and there "even if on the haze problem we're hazy about what's to be done".

There was laughter when he referred to the 250 meetings organised by Asean officials in any given year during which time there were breaks for "durian parties and karaoke sessions".

Zainon argued that there should be some restructuring of the Asean way. Quote: "After 30 years we can afford to have our feathers ruffled."

On another tangent was Michael Hayes, chief editor of the Phnom Penh Post who described the "Cambodia question" as one of Asean's greatest challenges. He noted that the largest investors come from Asean countries which before had faced the problem of Khmer refugees. There was then the reminder: "Cambodians are nervous about being swamped by cheap workers and whether they can compete. They are frightened of both Thailand and Vietnam".

Hayes appealed to Asean countries to open their institutions of higher learning to Cambodians. As it is, he added, there are fewer than 20

lawyers in the whole of Cambodia.

Also on a note of self-criticism, Hayes expressed doubts about Cambodian newspapers playing the collective role of watchdog. They had failed to deter deforestation and combat the scourge of AIDS. Cambodia now has the highest rate of AIDS infection in Asia.

Presenting the view of regional English-language magazines was Alejandro Reyes, senior correspondent of Asiaweek magazine in Hong Kong. Controlled by an American group the magazine attempts to present a different perspective from that of the group's parent magazine, Time.

Reyes reminded that English is not the first language of countries in Asean and "we're always mindful of that".

In the ensuing discussions there were criticisms about what was considered to be Indonesia's lack of urgency in combating the haze problem originating from forest fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan. There were calls for "active intervention" by Asean in Cambodia.

Providing some answers was Termsak with the reminder that President Suharto himself had apologised to his Asean neighbours. In the circumstances Asean co-operation had been galvanised. "What if there's no Asean as we face the haze? As it is neighbours have pitched in quickly to help."

On active intervention in Cambodia Termsak noted that the US had done so in the past and spent more than US\$2 billion (RM6.4 billion) a year. And yet it failed.

Emphasised was Asean's success in evolving and forging mutual confidence, with leaders often meeting and people living in peace. "This is the basic function of Asean," he added.

For seminar participants there was also the reminder that those in the media itself were casualties in the region's currency and stock market turmoils. A few newspapers in Thailand, including the English-language newspaper Asia Times, and Thailand Times, have folded. One Thai newspaper reported that 30 per cent of its clients were paying with bounced cheques. Another was offering 8 1/2 months' bonuses to its staff opting for early retirement.

Meanwhile, staff members of The Nation, one of Bangkok's strongly-opinionated newspapers, have accepted a 20 per cent pay cut.

Surely noted too by participants were the criticisms levelled by some Thai newspapers against Thai Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh. In Manila there was a huge rally of half-a-million people urging President Fidel Ramos not to initiate constitutional amendments to allow a second term of his presidency.

Sure enough a few American magazines thereafter targeted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. No American advice came from the American gurus often invited to Kuala Lumpur in the past to advise Malaysian managers how to do things. There was, however, advice from a financial columnist to Dr Mahathir to "try flattery" instead when dealing with George Soros. Fancy that!

Often quoted by a few Malaysians is Peter Drucker. There is then the following commentary by a writer in The Manchester Guardian Weekly: "What is one to make, for example, of the statement by Peter Drucker, an apologist for big corporations and their new-style 'Management philosophy': 'Society needs a return to spiritual values - not to offset the material but to make it fully productive'. A British reviewer aptly called this phrase and the entire last chapter of Drucker's The Landmarks of Tomorrow, 'The theology of General Motors'. (GM is the maker of Chevrolet, Pontiac, Oldsmobile and Cadillac.)

In the midst of all the turbulence mention must then be made about Myanmar, one of Asean's new members. The Government gave permission to

Aung San Suu Kyi's party to hold its annual congress. There was praise thereafter from her to the Government for the permission. Mayhaps the Asean Way of constructive engagement had helped matters.

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