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Asean: Long road ahead

By Kamrul Idris

THE speed of European integration has left Asean in the dust. The Southeast Asian grouping had better attend to the basics if it wants to catch up, writes KAMRUL IDRIS.

COMPARED to the European Union, which will be enlarged by 10 new members on May 1, Asean looks like a regional community on life-support.

Europe has open borders, no customs or trade barriers, a single currency and something close to an encompassing, continent-wide identity - all of which had begun as pipe dreams amid the rubble of the Second World War.

The EU's total of 25 nations is a magnificent jumble of cultures, languages, societies and economies held together by a gigantic bureaucracy centred in Brussels. Europeans are cracking their heads over a constitution, no less, while Asean officials endlessly mull over the costs and benefits of start-up co-operative agreements.

Like it or not, ever closer integration in the part of the world that unleashed two of history's most devastating conflicts has acted as a scold on Asean. It stands as an object lesson in the art of the possible against the truism that Southeast Asia, and Asia as a whole, is simply too disparate for tighter concord. Diversity hasn't been a hindrance in Europe - as much, or as little, separates Singapore from Laos as Luxembourg from Latvia or Europe's poorest country, Romania, which is on its way to accession, probably in 2007.

A United States of Southeast Asia isn't a delusion. By any reckoning, merging a population of half a billion people in 10 contiguous countries makes perfectly good economic sense. Liberalisation under the Asean Free Trade Area, even with its concessions to laggard members and state sectors, caused regional trade to jump by more than 25 per cent per year.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad tried to push the logic of a common market by hitching up Japan and South Korea into an East Asian economic group. But he was stymied at every turn by an America suspicious of the formation of blocs outside its sphere of influence.

So why is Southeast Asia stuck in limbo? There is something to be said for Europe's hare and Asean's tortoise being quite different political animals. Former Asean secretary-general Rodolfo Severino, speaking at a conference in Fukuoka, Japan, on April 7, said the grouping had been knit together by a consensual "looseness". This seeming contradiction in terms reflected the hard-headed realities of the day.

An Association of Southeast Asian Nations was cobbled together in 1967 as a "non-binding, informal, non-ideological, equal" club, resting above all on the notion that good fences made good neighbours. The confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia had ended just a year before; the Philippines was piqued over Sabah; after splitting off from Malaysia, island Singapore needed an anchor; and the Vietnam War was in full blast on Thailand's doorstep.

To the five signatories of the Bangkok Declaration, Southeast Asian nations had to hang together or hang separately. In the words of Malaysia's representative, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Tun Abdul Razak Hussein: "It is important that individually and jointly we should create a deep awareness that we cannot survive for long as independent but isolated peoples unless we also think and act together and unless we prove by deeds that we belong to a family of Southeast Asian nations bound together by ties of friendship and goodwill and imbued with

our own ideals and aspirations and determined to shape our own destiny."

Under the pressures of the Cold War, however, most of Asean's initial diplomacy was conducted not in ornate government halls but at the golf course. Its leisurely rounds were paced by Indonesian Foreign Minister Adam Malik's belief in "making haste slowly, in order to build a new association for regional co-operation". Good fences took time and sensitivity to each other's handicaps. Nearly a decade had to pass before Asean held its first summit, in Bali in 1976.

Unlike Europe, the newly sovereign, post-colonial member countries wanted the liberty to look inwards without interference, either from each other or anyone else. Asean was getting wedded to the concept of the nation-state, while Europe was tiring of it. And looseness succeeded, perhaps too well.

Asean suffers no lack of vision, as Razak testified, but its members are so leery of meddling in each other's domestic affairs that its relevance as a multilateral institution has been questioned. The urge for arms-length neutrality has lapsed since the end of the Cold War.

Asean's proponents, however, have never been embarrassed by the label "talk shop"; the Asean Regional Forum, for example, is a high-profile event in the international security calendar. As a "debating chamber", the Asean format still offers a quick mechanism to deal with intra-regional matters such as trans-boundary haze, the SARS and bird flu outbreaks and the Asian financial crisis of 1997.

But at the Fukuoka conference, organised by the European Commission delegation in Japan and the Asia-Europe Foundation, attention quickly shifted after Severino's keynote address. To the journalists invited to contribute to the topic of "a new Europe, a new Asia", Asean doesn't make news, except perhaps for the controversy over Myanmar's membership. Its peoples haven't been engaged enough to interest the media.

Of course, a direct comparison with the EU can be taken too far. The European project is a one-off, and specific to a region laid so low by internal rivalry that it was ready to compromise on national sovereignty. Asean, said Severino, was an inter-governmental concept. It was, and continues to be, driven by elites, its deliberations confined to a closed circle of ministers and bureaucrats. Europe, on the other hand, is far more democratic. Its leaders evangelised and the people converted to the faith - by referendums if necessary.

That is probably the biggest difference between the two: Without a popular mandate for concrete action, the limits of the Asean informal model are plain to see. "Asean has to be more legally binding for future credibility," said Severino. "It is good at frameworks but backs away from difficult political steps. As a result, many initiatives stagnate."

Last October's Declaration of Asean Concord II in Bali established the "x+2" formula, which allows for a pioneer team of members to move ahead, rather like France and Germany did for Europe. Though even the most ardent Europhiles will admit that the EU is not for copying, the Asean Vision 2020, a statement of intent made at the 1997 Kuala Lumpur summit, clearly had something like it in mind.

But how far theory can diverge from practice was acknowledged by Bernhard Zepter, head of the EC delegation in Japan. He said that there was more than one model of democracy and cautioned that the depth of regional integration depended on a willingness "to contribute to it as much as take from it".

That calls for harder rules in place of the Asean habit of soft observance. Rules require a supranational authority for compliance and dispute settlement and, more importantly, a sharper focus on what it means to be part of a shared endeavour.

Asean has to evolve from unbuttoned principles to what Severino called "norms of behaviour" - something akin to Europe's definition of itself as a "community of values".

"Norms" and "values", if they are ever to mean anything more than nice words on paper, have to be enforced by political will and a budget to match. Asean's high ambition cannot yet afford anything like another Brussels nor, to its shame, emergency help to members in crisis, such as Indonesia's over East Timor.

Until members' GDP levels rise higher, Severino's offer that "perhaps it is time for a new Asean" will remain tentative.

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