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When Asean deliberates on Asean

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SHAPING THE FUTURE:

For the Blue Economy concept to work, Asean needs to be regarded as one and not just in its constituent parts



Prime Minister **Datuk Seri Najib Razak** and Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister **Datuk Hamzah Zainuddin** at a dialogue session during the National Colloquium On Malaysia's Chairmanship Of Asean 2015 forum in Kuala Lumpur recently. Pic by Khairull Azry Bidin

VERY little of the discussion that ensues in a meeting on Asean touches on things that matter.

What usually happens is a well-tried recital of what Asean has done well: the resiliency of the Asean Way, the briskness of the Asean economy, and the peace and stability of Asean cooperation. To top it all up, we are going to have an Asean Community by the end of next year.

The expectations of change that is going to consume all of us in the coming years are making everybody excited. From government leaders, businesses and the ordinary people, the voices heard have been "yes" to the change that will also bring in better living standards and resources in abundance for the South-east Asian regional grouping that was founded in 1967.

Alas, the sense of success has unfortunately brought along with it a false feeling of arrogance that nobody, not even the European Union, could have done better.

It was with much relief that in the National Colloquium on Malaysia's Chairmanship of Asean 2015 held recently in the country's capital, Kuala Lumpur, the three-day deliberations have been kept tight and breezy.

With the well-thought out intention to start by trying out something new, discuss people issues first, the programme was laid out to begin with topics concerning civil society, followed by sessions on youth and women.

Rightly so in keeping with the mood to infuse meetings and future meetings on Asean to reflect this people-first orientation, the idea

was a welcomed change from the normally hard political and security stuff.

The country has much to gain from this colloquium, especially the emphasis on people-to-people issues. This is more urgently felt when the country is chairman of Asean next year.

All form of interventions, proposals and recommendations brought up during the deliberations will be keenly followed up by the government and the concerned agencies.

It was certainly a delight to experience, for instance, that in an afternoon session of more than one hour devoted to the issue of civil society, there were nearly 10 interventions from the floor either in the form of questions or comments that lasted for thirty-five minutes.

It was very commendable of Prime

Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak when, in his keynote address at the colloquium, he said Asean needed to go beyond outlines and blueprints to actions for it to transform. It was also underlined by Najib that for this to occur, more has to be done.

The first is the requirement for the grouping to begin to look at environmental and governance issues of concern.

Next on the list of priorities for the government would be such issues as the need for a more stable financial position for the grouping, a more strengthened and func-

ational secretariat and a revisit of the architecture of Asean to suit its new role for the region and beyond.

While wishing Asean all the best for the future, a more pertinent question for the colloquium participants to have asked would be what the future will look like for Asean.

Najib alluded to some of these elements in his keynote address. These include raising awareness of the rising nationalism in some Asean member countries, changing the perception of the acceptability of a rules-based approach in Asean affairs and the harmonisation of policies within Asean itself.

In deciding the road along that Asean should travel in the future, the opportunity was not availed of by participants in the adoption of a Blue Economy-type of future changes for the grouping.

This was a surprise, taking into consideration that this concept of a business change model developed by Gunter Pauli in 2010, has been adopted by several of Asean member countries, including Indonesia and Singapore. The way the model works is to consider the connectivity of all things to one another in a systems environment.

Like thinking outside the box, the concept attempts to look for new possibilities in things considered a

waste. The philosophy of the concept is based on the application of systems thinking into the process of change.

For the Blue Economy concept to be applied to Asean and the changes that will result in the near future to be fully understood, Asean needs to be regarded as one totality and not just in its constituent parts: political security, economic and the socio-cultural. The latter perception is really creativity-negative and not positively correct.

Asean's environment, as such, is like nature and the human body where any parts that are dysfunctional will disturb the equilibrium of the connectedness of the other parts.

Asean planners and policy-makers must bear in mind that for the sake of achieving a balance, there has to be a neat arrangement of networks and relationships and secured outcomes. Only then can the Asean community thrive sustainably in the coming years.



Dr Azhari Karim is a former diplomat and associate professor