

Moving Towards Asean Community, Malaysia Shows The Way
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By Ahmad Fuad Yahya

JAKARTA, Aug 8 (Bernama) -- Flying of the Asean flag to mark the Asean Day celebration may be a normal practice on Aug 8 annually, but today's celebration was a historic event for the regional grouping because it is the first time since its 44-year existence that the Asean flag is officially flown next to the national flag of Asean member countries.

As of today, the Asean flag is flown alongside the national flags of its member countries at the Asean National Secretariat, Diplomatic and Consular Missions in member countries and dialogue partners including all member states of the European Union (EU).

A very important fact that one must not ignore from this move, which is aimed at raising the profile of Asean and promoting a sense of Aseaness among its people, is that Malaysia had been ahead of everybody else in doing so since 2005.

The flying of the Asean flag next to the Malaysian flag, which is a common sight at Wisma Putra, the country's Foreign Ministry, since Malaysia was the last Asean Chair in 2005, gives an indication of Malaysia's forward looking in bringing Asean to the next level of development in its community building.

As one of the five founding members of Asean, Malaysia has played a very active role in the organisation with ideas and initiatives that later helped shape Asean into what it is today and what it is going to be in the future.

It is understood that the idea of an Asean Charter came from Malaysia.

Although it was actually mentioned in the Vientiane Plan of Action in 2004, it was in 2005 when Malaysia hosted the the summit that there was a declaration to establish a summit and to appoint an Eminent Persons Group to come out with recommendations on the charter.

But of course, as a consensus text, all other member countries contributed their part to the Charter.

Over the years, Malaysia had also played an important role in making the association as Asean 10, although during the 1997 summit which Malaysia hosted it only managed to get Asean Nine due to an "unfortunate turn of event" in Cambodia which left out the country to be admitted in later years.

Malaysia also initiated in the of Asean Plus Three summit, namely Asean and China, Japan and South Korea, which was the other name in replacement of the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) mooted by Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, but received objections especially from the United States then.

It is responsible for the East Asia Summit (EAS) and created the slogan currently used by Asean: "One Vision, One Identity, One Community".

Now as the association of the 10 nations of Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam progresses and matures, the year 2015 will be very important for Asean when it realises the Asean Community objective.

As for Malaysia, 2015 will also be another very important year as it will be taking the chair of Asean with the task of leading the preparation for another big picture of Asean's

direction post-2015.

Malaysia's Permanent Representative to Asean Datuk Hsu King Bee agreed that over the years Malaysia had made a lot of contributions in the evolution of Asean and in the regional architecture.

She said over the past 44 years, Asean has elaborated on its original objectives laid down in the Bangkok Declaration 1967, and its focus has expanded because "our cooperation and the regional and international challenges are different, so therefore Asean has to react to regional developments and international developments".

They include creating a free trade area to enable member countries to compete within Asean and outside Asean through Free Trade Agreements.

The Asean Charter was instrumental in giving the association a legal personality and expanded its values, she said.

"In the past we always talk about non-interference, respect for sovereignty, national identity, peaceful settlement, but with the charter, we have expanded the obligations and the values of the Asean member states because it is with the charter that we start talking about things like democracy, rule of law and good governance," the Ambassador said here Monday.

It was also institutionalised in the Asean Charter, which came into effect in 2008, that the Asean Summit be held twice in a year by the chair of Asean, which is determined on rotation based on the name of member countries in alphabetical order.

There was no summit for almost 10 years except for foreign ministers meetings after Asean was established in 1967 until 1976 when the first Asean Summit was held in Jakarta where the Asean Secretariat was also established.

The Asean Charter provides the appointment of the Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR) to Asean to support the councils for the implementation of the Asean Community, based on the three pillars namely the Asean Political-Security Community (APSC), Asean Economic Council (AEC), and Asean Social-Cultural Community (ASCC).

The CPR is guided by the Asean Charter and the blueprint for the Asean Community called the "Roadmap for an Asean Community 2009-2015, which outlined a total of 635 action lines for implementations to realise the Asean Community by 2015.

Some of the action lines are supposed to be undertaken by national governments, some by Asean collectively and some are aspirations in nature.

As of today, Asean was saying that it has been making commendable progress on achieving these action lines but whether the implementation of the actions gave impact or otherwise is another question.

For example if one may look at the free flow of goods in Asean and in countries of its dialogue partners that they signed a free trade agreement with, ratification of an agreement does not necessarily give effects if the respective country does not change its legislations to remove tariff and trade barriers.

Towards achieving the Asean Community goals, the CPR and all the community councils have set up an annual target based on the action lines that they are supposed to achieve.

Therefore all Asean member countries are making extra efforts in establishing annual

targets so that they can monitor the implementation of the action lines.

So have the implementation of action lines for the realisation of an Asean community benefited Asean member countries and their people?

Let's take a look at the APSC, which aims to create a region of peace and security to achieve a rule-based community of shared values and norms.

APSC also promotes a cohesive, peaceful and resilient region with shared responsibility for comprehensive security.

The whole purpose of all these actions is to provide an environment where the well-being of Asean people is protected and when there is peace and security in the region, member countries can undertake economic development.

Sharing her views, Hsu said one of the objectives of Asean Economic Community was a single market and production base and this could benefit the people because they can export more, create better employment and develop their economy.

The free flow of investment, free flow of services, free flow of goods will lead to the whole idea of making the Asean region a more competitive economic region.

"Economically, Asean member countries and their people will benefit from what we are trying to build -- a community through integration among our 10 countries," she said.

Asked whether the Asean Community follows a certain model like the European Community, Hsu said the Asean Community was different because it does not surrender competency on certain matters like economic policies, which European countries did for the European Union (EU).

"For us, we are still all the 10 Asean member countries, have still to come to certain agreement on policy before we can implement it, we are different, we are still an association of 10 sovereign countries, we have not surrendered our competency but we try to work together," she said.

Indonesia will be hosting the 19th Asean Summit in Bali in November which may discuss the admission of Timor Leste as Asean's 11th member state but there are still uncertainties whether the country will be admitted during the summit although Indonesia is giving its strong support and Malaysia is also supportive.

Another interesting development to take note of is that prior to Malaysia's chairmanship of Asean in 2015, Myanmar, who is slated to be the Asean Chair in 2016, has requested for a swap with Laos to chair the association in 2014.

To this request, the Joint Communique of the 44th Asean Foreign Ministers Meeting (AMM) in Bali recently noted that: "We welcome the positive developments in Myanmar and continue to render our full support to Myanmar on its efforts for national reconciliation and reconsolidation.

"We consider positively the willingness and readiness of Myanmar to take the Chairmanship of Asean in 2014, based on its firm commitment to the principles of Asean, and to recommend to the Asean Leaders for their consideration."

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