

ASEAN has right stuff to be world market leader, says Guan Eng
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KUALA LUMPUR, March 9 — Southeast Asia has the edge to be a powerhouse if the countries in the region band together and work to free up their politics and economies, Lim Guan Eng said today.

The Penang chief minister that the region is the natural choice to grow into the next major consumer market due to its strategic geographic location between rising giants India and China, its 600 million-strong population and with the old model of the US, Europe and Japan engines of growth on the wane due to their existing debt crisis and long-term jobless situation.

"The potential for this to happen is certainly real, but we must be aware that such a situation can only be achieved if our people become stronger consumers, which means that they need to have more money in their pockets.

"In other words, economic democratisation must first occur in order to facilitate the growth of a strong consumer market in the region," Lim told an ASEAN Democracy and Economic Development forum in George Town today.

A copy of his speech at the event was made available to the media.

Lim (picture) said for ASEAN to be a key market driver, it needed a strategy that will collectively raise income levels, especially those at the bottom levels of the economy, and step-up the skills to automatically increase worker productivity.

"In other words, if we can increase the purchasing power of our people, especially amongst the lower-income groups, we will be sure to create a great consumer market," the trained accountant said.

But he cautioned that care be taken to produce greater political and economic democratisation and decentralisation in the region and does not result in a wider income gap.

"Democratisation is a key factor for the continued growth of our region, and the fate of Myanmar is our biggest test," Lim said, pointing to the much-talked about nation that is making the transition from a military regime to a democracy and long considered ASEAN's collective responsibility.

He said it was ASEAN's duty to ensure that the democratisation of Myanmar is carried out peacefully and will result in it becoming a meaningful partner of growth.

Lim added that decentralisation of power is also another key issue in ASEAN due to the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural make-up in each country here and that it needed to be handled due to its close links with problems of political identity.

He said that by giving states more power, the central government can then focus on national policies.

The DAP MP for Bagan pointed to Penang to back up his arguments, saying his government had taken steps to democratise the state with new policies that are based on what the public really want and not what it thinks they want.

“Only by listening to the people, doing the people’s work and focusing on the people, can we hope to catch the fourth wave of democracy,” he said, pointing to the series of reforms enveloping entire nations worldwide.

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