The Role of Non-State Actors in ASEAN
ALEXANDER C. CHANDRA

Since its establishment in 1967, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has shown little interest in facilitating the participation of non-state actors in its decision-making processes. ASEAN is well-known for its elitist tendencies and for how few of its policies correspond to the needs of Southeast Asian people. At the same time, it could also be argued that ASEAN has become this way due to the lack of pressure from non-state actors on the Association. However, during its infancy, most ASEAN member countries were governed by authoritarian regimes which made it difficult for social pressure to emerge, both at the national and regional levels.
In recent years, non-state actors have gained importance in the regionalization process in Southeast Asia. The business community, the academic community, and non-government organizations (NGOs) get increasing recognition as critical participants in the creation of a regional community and identity. However, their participation in ASEAN has been limited to conferences, symposia, and seminars focusing on various regional issues. It was only after the financial crisis of 1997 that the involvement of a wider range of non-state actors in the association intensified, partly due to the process of relative democratization in the region.

In time for ASEAN’s plan to introduce an ASEAN Charter and to establish an ASEAN Community, the Association has begun to realize that there is widespread criticism of ASEAN’s closed and exclusive nature. There are now several forums through which civil society groups can find a voice in ASEAN, from the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA), which was convened in Batam, Indonesia in 2000, all the way up to the ASEAN Civil Society Conference, which was first held in Shah Alam, Malaysia in December 2005. Civil society groups have also been invited to provide input to the members of the Eminent Persons Group (EPG), which was tasked to prepare recommendations to the ASEAN Charter by the 12th ASEAN Summit in Cebu City in December 2006. These developments not only suggest that ASEAN should address its democracy deficit, but also that civil society groups are now ready to engage with ASEAN and its activities. ASEAN is indeed under pressure from the citizens of its member countries to make substantial changes in its modus operandi. Unless such attempts are made, the Association will lose its significance to the people of the region.

THE RELEVANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT WITH ASEAN

The idea that people should participate in ASEAN decision-making processes had already emerged in the 1980s among prominent figures within the elite ASEAN circle. Former Indonesian Foreign Minister and one of the founding fathers of ASEAN Adam Malik once stated that “the shaping of a future of peace, friendship and cooperation is far too important to be left to government and government officials... [as such, there is a need for] ever-expanding involvement and participation of the people”. Malik’s idea, however, only became an issue of discussion between those involved in Track 1 and Track 2 diplomacys. It was the ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS), established in 1988, that submitted an idea to have “an assembly of the people of ASEAN” in 1995 which subsequently resulted in the launching of the first ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA) in 2000. It was only then that the participation of the people was finally recognized by ASEAN and its member governments.

Concrete interaction between civil society groups and ASEAN predates

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3 As cited in Ali Alatas, ASEAN: An Association in Search of People or the People’s Search for an Association, Report of the First ASEAN People’s Assembly (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2001).

4 Track 1 refers to the practice of diplomacy amongst government officials. Track 2 diplomacy can be considered as the practice of bringing public intellectuals, academics, government, business, media and other relevant sectors in their private capacity to discuss economic, political, and security issues at both the domestic, regional, global levels. For detailed definitions of Track 1 and Track 2 diplomacy, see, for example, Carolina G. Hernandez, ‘Track Two and Regional Policy: The ASEAN ISIS in ASEAN Decision Making’, in Twenty Two Years of ASEAN ISIS: Origin, Evolution and Challenges of Track Two Diplomacy, eds. H. Soesastro et al., (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies and the ASEAN Institute for Strategic and International Studies, 2006).
APA. An example of such interaction is the involvement of the business sector in many of ASEAN’s economic integration initiatives, which resulted in the establishment of the ASEAN Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ASEAN-CCI) in 1972. ASEAN-CCI became an important vehicle through which the business community channels inputs and concerns on regional economic issues to ASEAN. It also played a key role in the creation of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Following the surge of trade liberalization in the mid-1980s, the ASEAN business community began to realize the increasing production diversity and complementary nature of ASEAN economies, resulting from the process of industrialization and the operations of transnational corporations (TNCs) in the region. These factors, among others, justified ASEAN’s introduction of AFTA in the early 1990s.

During the 1980s and 1990s, a regional production network, ethnic business network, and sub-regional economic zones have emerged, all of which have helped initiate an informal bottom-up regionalization process throughout East Asia. In Southeast Asia, this process played a crucial role in influencing ASEAN to look towards many other regional economic integration initiatives. Although political cooperation may have been at the forefront of ASEAN’s overall agenda, economic integration has been at the heart of many of the Association’s regional integration initiatives. Within the ASEAN Secretariat, for example, funding has been concentrated mainly on economic integration initiatives. Although the Secretariat has well-trained economists and trade experts, the business sector is known to provide substantial input to regional economic integration initiatives.

The academic community has also been playing a key role in ASEAN. It has been known to articulate its own vision for an integrated ASEAN. The ASEAN-ISIS and the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), for example, have provided much-needed input to ASEAN. Members of ASEAN-ISIS, which include the Brunei Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Cambodian Institute for Co-operation and Peace (CICP), the Indonesian Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the Laos Institute for Foreign Affairs, the Malaysian Institute for Strategic and International Studies, the Philippines’ Institute for Strategic and Development Studies (ISDS), the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA), Thailand’s Institute for Security and International Studies (ISIS), and Vietnam’s Institute for International Relations (IIR), are influential not only at the national level, but also at the regional level. This influence allows ASEAN-ISIS to play a bridging role between ASEAN and wider civil society through its steering of the APA initiative. This bridging role reflects a close relationship between ASEAN and national and regional think-tanks.

Unfortunately, civil society involvement with ASEAN has been limited to the academic circle and the business community. Indeed, it was only after the economic crisis of 1997 that more civil society groups became involved in

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4 An informal discussion was conducted with a staff member whose name will remain anonymous throughout this paper at the ASEAN Secretariat on August 2006. 

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Although both ASEAN-ISIS and ISEAS have similar research programs (i.e. economics, politics and strategic studies, social and cultural studies, etc.), the two institutions differ in that the former is comprised of think-tanks with regional interests at the national level while the latter is simply a regional think-tank. ISEAS attended the formation of ASEAN-ISIS in Bali, Indonesia in 1984. However, since ISEAS considers itself a regional think-tank, the Singapore Institute of International Affairs (SIIA) joined in the ASEAN-ISIS instead to represent Singapore (an informal discussion, on September 7, 2006, with a researcher in one of the academic think-tanks that is part of the ASEAN-ISIS. The name of this individual will remain anonymous throughout the paper).
ASEAN and its activities, also largely as a result of the process of democratization in the Southeast Asian region.\textsuperscript{10} ASEAN became of interest to non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The participation of NGOs and other civil society organizations (CSOs) is occasioned partly by their work at the grassroots and reflects an immediate response to public need.\textsuperscript{11} CSOs in general are also “naturally issue-oriented or even issue specific”,\textsuperscript{1} which makes them ideal advisers to regional and international organizations.

Meanwhile, Southeast Asian CSOs themselves have been questioning the need to engage with ASEAN at all. Prior to the economic crisis (1997-98 period), most Southeast Asian CSOs, apart from the academic community, were indifferent to the Association. Many CSOs saw ASEAN as an elitist club for the member countries’ foreign ministers, a club that made many regional integration initiatives without any firm commitment to implement them. Although NGOs and grassroots organizations in Southeast Asia have been involved in various regional networks, most of their activities have focused on campaign and advocacy on multilateral bodies and their arrangements. They paid more attention to the threats posed by international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). ASEAN, on the other hand, was regarded as a weak organization with little power to impact on the well-being of Southeast Asian people.

There are numerous reasons why civil society is now keen on engaging ASEAN. First and foremost is ASEAN’s intention to establish an ASEAN Community by 2020, as enshrined in the Bali Concord II (2000). This agreement promotes political, economic, and socio-cultural co-operation through the ASEAN Security Community (ASC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC) respectively. During the 38th ASEAN Economic Ministerial Meeting (AEM) held in Kuala Lumpur in August 2006, ASEAN announced the acceleration of the creation of AEC to 2015, five years earlier than originally planned\textsuperscript{13}. Many regard the ASEAN Community as ASEAN’s most ambitious plan, one that has forced CSOs to take ASEAN more seriously.

Secondly, Southeast Asian CSOs are increasingly of the opinion that ASEAN is a platform from which to influence policy at the regional level. Although the prevailing view is that regional policy is determined by domestic politics, regional organizations influence policies at the national level. In trade related issues, for example, the ASEAN Secretariat has been keen to promote bilateral free trade agreements (BFTAs), an initiative that draws both support and concern from government officials and CSOs in the region. Some are concerned that BFTAs might damage multilateral trade negotiations under the auspices of the WTO,\textsuperscript{14} while others are concerned about the potential damage that this form of trade liberalization may have on ASEAN’s own integration process.\textsuperscript{15} Apart from the trade-diversion effect, pursuing different trade commitments can also be confusing. Headed by a staunch neo-liberal, Ong Keng Yong, ASEAN believes that bilateral deals are ways to iron out...
thorny issues between two trading partners before they stymie larger negotiations. While ASEAN has been actively involved in this type of trade liberalization, Southeast Asian CSOs have been nervously watching out for the potential impacts of faster and more comprehensive trade liberalization under BFTAs. Yet, few civil society groups in the region showed any interest in the BFTA negotiations between ASEAN and China. As a result, the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement was implemented in 2004 with little response from civil society groups. In fact, in some countries such as Indonesia, the deal went into the implementation phase without even parliamentary ratification.

Thirdly, while increasingly aware of the potential harm ASEAN policies may have on policies of member countries, ASEAN CSOs also acknowledge the potential benefits that ASEAN might generate for its member countries. In spite of the 1997-98 economic crisis, ASEAN is still in existence, proving that member countries still believe the Association can be useful. ASEAN is regarded as one of the most successful regional groupings in the world by many regional integration observers for, inter alia, its ability to maintain stability and sustained economic development. Member countries have enjoyed peace, and have thus been able to concentrate on their own economic development. In other words, ASEAN can be seen as a useful tool, a buffer to prevent the conflicts that plagued its member countries before the Association was established in 1967.

**NETWORKS AND FORUMS FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH ASEAN**

Over the years, forums were opened so that civil society can engage ASEAN and ASEAN issues. However, civil society groups have yet to consolidate among themselves regarding how and to what extent their engagement should be, thereby limiting their engagement with ASEAN. Currently, there are two formal forums for civil society engagement with ASEAN, namely the ASEAN People’s Assembly (APA) and the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC). Of the two, APA is the one more recognised by ASEAN; it is incorporated in the Vientiane Action Program (VAP) signed during the 10th ASEAN Summit in Laos on November 29, 2004. A formal network represents the academic community (the ASEAN-ISIS) while some groups that attended the first ACSC in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005 started the Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA) to promote broader civil society engagement with ASEAN.

In essence, both ACSC and SAPA are considered an alternative forum and network for engaging ASEAN. The new way many civil society groups want to engage ASEAN produced the ACSC and subsequently SAPA.

**ASEAN-ISIS AND SAPA: NETWORKING THE REGION**

As mentioned earlier, the Southeast Asian business community was one of the few civil society groups that carried out some networking within the region through the ASEAN-CCI. However, it was the academic community that has active influence on many ASEAN policies. The ASEAN-ISIS can be considered as the most established academic network working on ASEAN. While some might...
describe ASEAN-ISIS as a loose association of think-tanks, a policy-network, or a policy-community, those within the ASEAN-ISIS circle or those who have been in contact with the network would see it as Track 2 diplomacy. The idea of forming an ASEAN-ISIS emerged from a discussion between Juruf W anandi of CSIS and an American scholar on ASEAN Donald Emerson, in the early 1980s. A number of subsequent meetings among like-minded Southeast Asian institutes finally resulted in the creation of an ASEAN-ISIS as a formal network of international and strategic institutes in key Southeast Asian countries. It was at the fourth meeting of these institutes in Singapore in June 1988 that the ASEAN-ISIS was formally launched.

ASEAN-ISIS has become the key actor in developing the concept of Track 2 diplomacy, or the policy dialogue between government officials, think-tanks, and policy analysts. According to Carolina Hernandez, one of the leading figures in the ASEAN-ISIS, the relative success of the ASEAN-ISIS in penetrating the foreign and security policy-making processes at the regional level can be seen in “(1) the institutionalization of meetings between ASEAN-ISIS and the ASEAN Senior Official Meeting (SOM); (2) the acknowledgement of the role of ASEAN ISIS in the Joint Communiques of the AMM since 1991; [and] (3) the solicitation by ASEAN SOM of the views of ASEAN ISIS on issues they wish to be studied further prior to making official policy.” Another important role of ISIS is its attempts to act as a bridge between ASEAN policy-makers (Track 1) and the rest of civil society, particularly NGOs (or Track 3). In its Report of the Eighth Southeast Asian Forum, which was submitted to the ASEAN SOM in July 1998, ASEAN-ISIS urged ASEAN to allow the participation of civil society groups in its decision making processes. This and similar efforts facilitated the launching of the APA.

SAPA is another important network. It is a new network of South and East Asian civil society groups, particularly NGOs, with a specific working group on ASEAN and the ASEAN Charter. The network itself was a result of the Strategic Action Planning for Advocacy meeting that was organised by several regional NGOs in Bangkok on February 3-4, 2006. The Bangkok meeting was held as a result of informal consultations between the regional CSOs that attended the Kuala Lumpur ACSC in December of the previous year. The participants at that informal meeting felt the need to come up with a new mechanism, either a forum or a platform, where information and resources could be shared in order to enhance the effectiveness of civil society engagement with the various intergovernmental processes that have rapidly risen in the region in recent years.

Shortly after, five regional and international NGOs, including Forum Asia, the Southeast Asian Committee for Advocacy (SEACA), the Third World Network (TWN), and the Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (AsiaDHRRA), agreed to initiate and facilitate the creation of SAPA. During the Bangkok meeting, working groups were established to discuss specific issues, such as the WG on Human Rights Education, the WG on the Asian People’s Charter and World Social Forum

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20 Soesastro et al., op. cit., p. 5.

21 The signatories of the Statutes of ASEAN-ISIS were Jusuf W anandi (Indonesian Centre for Strategic and International Studies – CSIS), Noordin Sopiee (Malaysian Institute of Strategic and International Studies – ISIS), Carolina Hernandez (Center for Integrative and Development Studies – CIDDS), Lau Teik Soon (Singapore Institute of International Studies – SIIA), and Kusuma Snitwongse (the Thai Institute of Security and International Studies – ISIS).

22 See, for example, Hernandez, op. cit., p. 20.


24 Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy, SAPA: Background and Context, (Bangkok, Unpublished SAPA documentation, 2006).
(WSF), and the WG on ASEAN and the ASEAN Charter. To date, however, it is only the WG on ASEAN that is fully functional.

During its Consultation Meeting in Singapore on September 19, 2006, SAPA members agreed that the network should serve as an open platform for consultation, co-operation, and co-ordination among Asian social movements and civil society organizations, including NGOs, people’s organizations, and trade unions who are engaged in action, advocacy, and lobbying at inter-governmental processes and organizations. The network also aims to enhance co-operation among its members and partners to increase the impact and effectiveness of their engagement with inter-governmental bodies. The main areas of engagement for SAPA include issues of democracy and human rights, peace and human security, sustainable development and environment, as well as globalization and trade, finance and labour. Apart from ASEAN, therefore, SAPA’s main targets include the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the United Nations (UN) etc.

Unlike the ASEAN-ISIS and its APA, both ACSC and SAPA are not mentioned in any existing formal ASEAN documents. The initiative to set up both ACSC and SAPA was due partly to increasing dissatisfaction with APA’s slow progress. In fact, many CSOs that participated in APA later attended the ACSC and subsequently joined SAPA. APA was, indeed, successful in building a bridge between ASEAN bureaucracy and the region’s CSOs, two worlds that had been apart for far too long. But in spite of APA, little actual engagement has taken place between ASEAN and regional CSOs. After all, APA is only a general meeting place for CSOs, NGOs, and civic organizations; it provided little opportunity to directly influence the agenda-setting of the Association. Another reason for the emergence of alternative forums for CSOs is the differences of opinion between academics, such as the ASEAN-ISIS and ISEAS, and the rest of civil society, about the way ASEAN integration should be pursued. With regard to economic integration, for example, ASEAN-ISIS supports an open economy for ASEAN and favors trade liberalization. National and regional NGOs, on the other hand, are more cautious, fearing the possible adverse effects of trade liberalization and open economies.

ASEAN-RECOGNIZED CIVIL SOCIETY FORUMS

APA is “a general meeting of civil society organizations, non-government organizations, and civic organizations from the ten member-states of ASEAN.” ... [It] aims to serve as a vessel for articulating and conveying the people’s view and interests outside of the formal political channels”. It was convened on the rationale that the process of community-building in ASEAN must include all layers of society to make the Association more relevant to the ordinary citizens. Prior to the launching of APA, ASEAN-ISIS—the core of this initiative—already argued that interaction between Track 1 and Southeast Asian NGOs (or Track 3) should be enhanced. When the Thai

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Foreign Minister called for the establishment of the congress of ASEAN people during the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Brunei in 1995. ASEAN-ISIS responded by introducing the idea of an assembly of the peoples of ASEAN, which transcended the idea of ASEAN officials at the time to set up a regional inter-parliamentary union. ASEAN-ISIS wanted a more broadly representative people’s assembly that would include representatives from various elements of civil society.

After confronting various setbacks, such as lack of funding and the reservation of ASEAN officials towards the idea, the first APA was finally launched in Batam, Indonesia on November 24-25, 2000. Currently, APA and the ASEAN-ISIS are seen in the VAP as initiatives to bring the people of the region closer to the Association, along with the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC), the ASEAN Parliamentary Organization (AIPO), and the ASEAN University Network. There had been three additional APA meetings after the first one in Batam. The second APA was held in Bali, Indonesia in 2002, and the third and fourth in Manila, Philippines in 2004 and 2005 respectively. The fifth APA will again be held in Manila in December 2006.

The First ACSC, on the other hand, was the initiative of the Malaysian government, which commissioned the ASEAN Study Center of the Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) to hold the event parallel to the 11th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in December 2005. The event was supported by the ASEAN Secretariat, as well as another Malaysian NGO, the Third World Network (TWN). Although UiTM, an academic organization, took the co-ordinating role, the difference between ACSC and APA was that NGOs also played a role in the formation of ACSC. The ACSC, which was attended by more than 120 participants from CSOs throughout Southeast Asia, produced a statement to be presented to the ASEAN heads of state. This was the first time that ASEAN Leaders had invited to hear representatives from civil society groups in the region on their views on the process of ASEAN community-building. Initially, ACSC was meant to be a one-off event, with no follow-up events planned for the subsequent ASEAN Summit. However, during meetings between ASEAN leaders and representatives of civil society groups at the 11th ASEAN Summit, ASEAN leaders recognised the ACSC and supported its annual convening.

THE ASEAN CHARTER, EMINENT PERSONS’ GROUP, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

At the 11th ASEAN Summit, with the theme “One Vision, One Identity”, ASEAN Leaders announced the drafting of an ASEAN Charter which would serve as the legal and institutional framework for ASEAN. The Charter would codify all ASEAN norms, rules, and values, as well as reaffirm many other agreements that ASEAN signed prior to the ASEAN Charter. An Eminent Persons Group, composed of highly distinguished and well respected citizens from ASEAN member countries, was set up to examine and provide practical recommendations in the making of an ASEAN Charter. Recommendations from the EPG

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People’s Assembly (APA): Paving a Multi-Track Approach in Regional Community Building’, in Twenty Two Years of ASEAN ISIS: Origin, Evolution and Challenges of Track Two Diplomacy, eds. H. Soesastro et al. (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies and ASEAN Institutes for Strategic and International Studies. 2006), 53-73.

Caballero-Anthony, op. cit., p. 65.
will be taken into consideration during the next ASEAN Summit and forwarded to a High Level Task Force responsible for drafting the ASEAN Charter. Since December 2005, the EPG has met seven times: the first time in Kuala Lumpur after the 11th ASEAN Summit; the second time in Bangkok on February 14-15, 2006; the third in Ubud, Bali, on April 17-19, 2006; the fourth in Singapore on June 27-29, 2006; the fifth in Kuala Lumpur on August 22-24, 2006; the sixth in Siem Reap on September 24-26, 2006; and, finally, the seventh in Brunei Darussalam, on November 8-9, 2006. EPG members and civil society representatives met during the aforementioned Bali and Singapore meeting, concentrating on issues pertaining to political and security cooperation and economic cooperation respectively. Subsequently, Southeast Asian civil society groups also met with the Special Adviser to the Philippines’ EPG member, Fidel Ramos, to make their submission on the socio-cultural pillar and institutional mechanism issues on November 10, 2006 in Quezon City, Philippines. Representatives of civil society groups also submitted a letter to the members of EPG on November 4, 2006, reiterating the main elements of their three submissions.

CIVIL SOCIETY SUBMISSIONS TO THE EPG ON THE ASEAN CHARTER

As mentioned above, the first meeting took place in Ubud, Bali and concentrated on the first main pillar of the ASEAN Community: political and security cooperation. The meeting was also attended by representatives of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Organization (AIPPO) and the Working Group for an ASEAN Human Rights Mechanism. Prior to that meeting, on the same day, members of the EPG held another special consultation with representatives of ASEAN-ISIS. CSO representatives, under the auspices of SAPA, submitted a joint input on ASEAN political and security cooperation. On its first submission to the members of EPG on the ASEAN Charter, members of SAPA expressed great enthusiasm for an ASEAN Charter and the opportunity to engage with ASEAN during the Charter’s creation.

The second meeting between civil society groups and EPG members took place in Singapore on June 8, 2006, and concentrated on economic issues in the ASEAN Community. The meeting, hosted by the Singaporean based think-tank, the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), was attended by NGO representatives, members of the regional and national academic community based in Singapore, and the business community (with a special meeting between the EPG and an international consulting firm, McKinsey and Co., conducted later). SAPA reaffirmed its commitment to engage in the formation of an ASEAN Charter and committed to carrying on the process after the EPG’s task would have been completed.

The last submission of SAPA, on the socio-cultural pillar and ASEAN institutional mechanism, was submitted in Quezon City, on November 10, 2006. For some practical reasons, the meeting was mainly attended by representatives of civil society groups from the Philippines. From the EPG side, Ambassador Rosario Manalo, special adviser to former President Ramos, received the submission.

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33 This section gives special attention to the inputs from members of the civil society groups that are part of SAPA. Inputs from the ASEAN-ISIS are well documented in Soesastro et al., op. cit., 177-91.

34 See, for example, Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy, SAPA’s Letter to the Members of EPG Reiterating the Main Elements of the Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA) Submissions to the Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter, Unpublished SAPA document (2006).


36 For further details of SAPA’s submission on socio-cultural pillar and ASEAN institutional mechanism, see Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy, Solidarity for Asian People’s Advocacy (SAPA) Working Group on ASEAN Submission on the Socio-Cultural Pillar and In-
RESPONSES AND REACTIONS OF THE EMINENT PERSONS GROUP TO CIVIL SOCIETY INPUTS

Participation in all ASEAN decision-making processes is a key concern for civil society. CSOs are demanding a democratic and inclusive process with clear mechanisms for participation in national and regional consultations. In general, the EPG concurred with the idea that ASEAN and the decision-making process of the ASEAN Charter should be open to civil society participation. At the first meeting between the EPG and civil society, members of the EPG appreciated civil society’s contributions to the ASEAN Charter.  

In fact, SAPA was the only group present at the meeting that had prepared a written submission. Others, including the representatives of the Working Group on Human Rights Mechanism and AIPO made only oral statements during the meeting. During the meeting, Ali Alatas of Indonesia stressed that the dilemma for the EPG was whether to decide on basic principles that provide norms, guidelines, and a framework for ASEAN cooperation and policy implementation; or, simply to draft a recommendation that incorporates all important issues that emerge in the region. He did, however, hint that the EPG favored the former over the latter option. Fidel V. Ramos of the Philippines also participated actively in the discussion. Others, particularly those representing the less democratic countries of Southeast Asia, were relatively silent and appeared cautious about confronting the civil society groups. It would, of course, have been more interesting if more EPG members, particularly those from Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV countries), not to mention those from Singapore, showed more clearly their reactions to the process of civil-society engagement with ASEAN.

At the second meeting, the EPG Chairman again expressed his satisfaction with the contribution of civil society groups. There was also an interesting exchange on the issue of people-to-people engagement. In relation to the specific terminology used by SAPA, for example, Fidel Ramos felt that the term people empowerment, rather than pro-people, would be more appropriate in a Charter, as the term pro-people connotes a top-down elitist approach that civil society would rather put aside. Some EPG members, however, expressed their views in more subtle ways by throwing back the question on how CSOs propose to implement a “pro-people” policy in ASEAN.

It is clear that civil society groups are starting to show keen interest in the ASEAN regional project. However, it has a very active civil society. He tried to assure the audience by saying that the EPG would certainly listen not only to the views of civil society groups, but also parliaments and academic think tanks. For further details of Alatas’ views on the ASEAN Charter and the EPG’s engagement with representatives of civil society groups, see, for example, The Leaders, “Interview with Ali Alatas”, The Leader (N/A) available online: <http://www.the-leaders.org/library/05.html>.

Fidel Ramos was in fact one of the most active members of the EPG in the overall EPG-civil society engagement process. In his letter to the President of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, dated April 25, 2006, which reports his activities during the EPG and CSO meetings, former President Ramos wrote that he was the first EPG member who initiated consultations with civil society at the national level. The event took place in the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines, on March 23, 2006, and was attended by 30 NGO representatives as well as members of the ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC).
remains to be seen how the recommendations from the EPG to the High Level Task Force (HLTF) will be taken up. Some CSO demands may be seen as too radical by some ASEAN member governments. The participation of civil society groups in decision-making processes in countries such as Burma is still limited while freedom of expression in some of the older ASEAN members, such as Singapore, is still constrained. Yet, the EPG-civil society consultation process is an important step in guaranteeing an ASEAN Charter that reflects the needs and interests of all Southeast Asians.

IS THERE A FUTURE FOR ASEAN-CS ENGAGEMENT?

The long-term future of civil society engagement with ASEAN depends entirely on the ability of regional CSOs to come up with a united stance vis-à-vis ASEAN. Currently, civil society groups in South-east Asia are very much fragmented. As mentioned previously, members of the academic community and many NGO representatives hold divergent views on the way in which the ASEAN integration process should be pursued. Given ASEAN’s limited experience in allowing civil society groups to participate in the agenda-setting, it might be difficult for the Association to deal directly with the numerous civil society groups in the region. Another key challenge to civil society engagement with ASEAN is the Association’s lack of openness to civil society participation. Less democratic member countries are still unsure about civil society engagement in the ASEAN process. Countries such as Burma, and even Singapore, would wish to stop civil society groups from participating in the Association’s decision-making processes.

ASEAN and its existing CSO network still need to familiarise local and national CSOs with the Association and its activities. Currently, only national and regional CSOs with regional and / or international interests are actively engaged with ASEAN. The task of popularising