

## AN ASEAN FOURTH PILLAR: IS IT NECESSARY?

by Joyce A. Teodoro

At the opening session of the National Colloquium on Malaysia's Chairmanship of ASEAN 2015 on 8 April 2014, Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak proposed the creation of an ASEAN fourth pillar. This fourth pillar is envisioned to address important cross-sectoral issues, such as environment and governance issues, that cut across the existing three pillars of ASEAN.

Prime Minister Razak opined that through the creation of another pillar, ASEAN will have a new platform for focused discussions on critical issues such as climate change and the haze problem. This move was welcomed by some members of the academe, particularly from Malaysia, taking note that these non-traditional challenges necessitate a dynamic platform to enable leaders to formulate more effective responses. The need to address these cross-cutting issues only becomes more pressing as they transcend traditional boundaries and can lead to adverse consequences that can impact the entire region. The academics also added that such proposal not only provides ASEAN the needed mechanism to address cross-sectoral issues, but also and more importantly, is in line with the bloc's aspiration to evolve into a mature regional body. Through such a mechanism, they argued, ASEAN is sending out the message that it is ready to assume a more significant role.

The proposal of Prime Minister Razak comes at a time when Malaysia is set to assume ASEAN Chairmanship in 2015, with its hosting coinciding with the year when the ASEAN Community will be realized. As it takes on the helm of ASEAN, Malaysia has identified one of its priorities to be the creation of ASEAN institutions that are strong, robust, and efficient. Given such thrust, it is thus unsurprising that Malaysia is poised to introduce new measures it deems necessary for strengthening the bloc as it continues to pursue its post-2015 agenda.

### *Assessing the proposal's viability*

Malaysia's proposal to create a new mechanism to respond to pressing challenges shows the commitment to address the deficit in the current institutions and mechanisms in ASEAN. On many occasions, ASEAN has found itself unable to go beyond discussions, consequently hampering the organization's ability to arrive at tangible responses. Perennially facing bottlenecks and deadlocks in resolving myriad issues, ASEAN, in general, and ASEAN Member States (AMS), in particular, need to look for new avenues that can turn discussions into concrete solutions. Hence, any move geared towards strengthening the institutional capacity of ASEAN is welcomed at this juncture. The need for a more credible ASEAN becomes more urgent than ever: as the 10 member states finally become a Community, the institutions that support it should be strong and responsive first and foremost.

Malaysia's proposal steers ASEAN towards a direction where it is being asked to do more and transcend rhetoric. As issues and challenges grow in complexity, ASEAN cannot afford to be hampered by constraints. Otherwise, it risks being put on the sidelines. However, while such action can be interpreted as an initiative for reform, the feasibility of the Malaysian proposition begs a closer look.

ASEAN is in the midst of its community-building process, with numerous ASEAN Blue Print action lines still waiting for full implementation. While the proposal intends to compel ASEAN to gain headway on issues that have been languishing and facing deadlocks in negotiations, one cannot dismiss its likely implications. First, the proposal is not clear on how this fourth pillar will look like. ASEAN needs to thresh out the parameters and discern how changes will affect the existing set-up, particularly vis-à-vis the existing three pillars, in terms of mechanisms and procedures, among others. It is crucial to ensure that there is no duplicity. Second is the issue of additional cost, both in manpower and resources. At present, ASEAN holds more

than 1,000 related meetings annually, which is already causing a strain on the AMS, particularly on the developing countries. Meanwhile, the annual budget of the ASEAN Secretariat stands at USD 17 million. With an additional pillar, the number of meetings would increase because of the additional mandate on both ASEAN and AMS and would consequently put greater load on a budget that is likely to remain unchanged.

Beyond these issues, the more pressing concern that needs to be raised is how such a proposal can realize its envisioned reforms. While the proposal offers a new alternative for discussions, it should not merely provide or serve as a platform. To will ASEAN to move forward does not lie in additional layers of institutions; rather, it lies in the rethinking of some of the fundamental principles that govern it. Over the years, many have called on ASEAN to move forward from its unique brand of diplomacy characterized by an informal, consensus-building, and non-confrontational style – the ASEAN Way – to a rules-based approach. A successful transition will give ASEAN a stronger hold on the enforcement of its various legal instruments. Due to the incompatibility between the ASEAN Way and the rules-based approach, ASEAN finds itself unable to maximize the gains of some of its initiatives. This affirms that the problem lies not in the shortage of ASEAN bodies and instruments that deal with various issues, be they specific or cross-cutting, but in the disconnect between principles and institutions. The principles are not adapting to changes; the institutions, though bounded and guided by the principles that they are built on, meanwhile, cannot remain static, otherwise they lose their relevance.

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#### *Continuously evolving ASEAN*

The proposal to create an ASEAN fourth pillar may have far-reaching implications but one cannot discount its merits. The maturation of ASEAN as a regional body starts, among others, from having sound institutions that govern its procedures and mechanisms. As regional integration deepens, issues and challenges will grow and become more complex. Thus, it would be unwise for ASEAN or the AMS not to put in place measures that will address the deficits the institution is facing. As ASEAN is often labeled as a talk shop, it is laudable that initiatives are being forwarded to strengthen the body. It only signals that ASEAN is not deaf to criticism – it is, in fact, willing to make the necessary adjustments as it assumes a bigger role. It is only fitting that ASEAN continues to be circumspect with regard to its effectiveness as a regional institution as it enters another phase of its integration process. ASEAN will be judged not on how long it has existed, but on how it has been able to evolve into an institution responsive to change and how it has brought development to its people. 🌸

Joycee A. Teodoro is a Foreign Affairs Research Specialist with the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies of the Foreign Service Institute.

Ms. Teodoro can be reached at [jateodoro@fsi.gov.ph](mailto:jateodoro@fsi.gov.ph).

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