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No. 87/2011 dated 2 June 2011

ASEAN Community: Losing Grip over Vision 2015?

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

ASEAN seems to be losing grip of its own future. Vision 2015 of a united and integrated ASEAN Community seems to be slipping away. Only strong leadership can salvage the road ahead. After Indonesia in 2011, who could it be?

Commentary

REMARKS BY ASEAN'S Secretary-General this week suggest that ASEAN's vision of itself as an integrated community by 2015 is set to be delayed. In one of the strongest admissions that ASEAN Community 2015 is slipping, Dr Surin Pitsuwan spoke at a gathering in Singapore about problems implementing the ASEAN vision. The year 2015, which is four years away, "will not be an absolute cut-off date". "It is going to be a work-in-progress," he said at the launch of the ASEAN Competitiveness Report 2010 by Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy on 1 June 2011. "Four years (to 2015) is just a target date. It is not an end-date. A lot of work needs to be done," he stated further during question time.

Expected slowdown

Dr Pitsuwan spoke in a calm and measured tone as he stated what some analysts have been expecting for some time. But one could sense that beneath his serene disposition was a tinge of exasperation. This was probably the first public admission by a high-ranking ASEAN official that the Southeast Asian grouping's plan for an ASEAN Community by 2015 is not moving as smoothly as it should. The platform he chose to float the possibility of a delay was most appropriate: an event about ASEAN's competitiveness. Dr Pitsuwan had actually missed his flight from Jakarta where he is based. But he made it a point to be present because of the importance of the launch. His unstated message was clear: setbacks in the integration plan would seriously undermine ASEAN's competitiveness at a time of rising economic giants like China and India that are sucking away foreign investment.

The vision of an ASEAN Community comprising three pillars – Political-Security, Economic and Socio-Cultural – was originally to be achieved by 2020. It was subsequently accelerated to 2015 to quicken the momentum of integration in view of the growing competition from other regions and countries. It would be a blow if the deadline has to be pushed back to its original 2020. Given Dr Pitsuwan's remarks, it appears that the coming 19th ASEAN summit later this year in Bali would have to address this crucial question of a new deadline.

The biggest factor that would set back Vision 2015 would be the gap between plans and action. Dr Pitsuwan said ASEAN's "problems in implementation" revolved around agreements on economic integration not being

acted upon. While these have been ratified by the member states, they have to make that next important step. "But the story does not stop with ratification. We have to implement," he said. Laws have to be passed to enable the implementation of the agreements while the respective finance ministries have to allocate the necessary provisions for the plans to be put into effect.

Dr Pitsuwan was candid in his prognosis of the state of readiness for integration. The diversity within ASEAN, he said, is also reflected in the different levels of governance. Problems in implementing integration agreements arise, he said, when there are vested interests, including of "big families".

Other Factors

Dr Pitsuwan's jolting remarks came just a month after ASEAN leaders met for their 18th summit in Jakarta on 7-8 May 2011. The leaders grappled with two other challenges to the grouping: the first was the territorial dispute involving neighbours Cambodia and Thailand; the second was Myanmar's diplomatic stand-off with the West. Both were tough issues, though not as central to ASEAN's survival as the group's economic integration.

The Thai-Cambodia dispute over the borders of the Preah Vihear temple is the most serious in ASEAN's history. The clash has led to the deaths of several soldiers on both sides and the displacement of thousands of civilians – something unprecedented in ASEAN. The effective leadership of Indonesia, the current ASEAN chair, contained the problem for now. A framework for a solution away from the battlefield has been put in place. Both countries are now resolving their dispute at the International Court of Justice.

The diplomatic dispute over Myanmar, on the other hand, is not an internal ASEAN squabble. The underlying problem has more to do with Myanmar's position vis-a-vis the West. ASEAN has been staving off Western criticisms of Myanmar ever since it became a member, while internally, the group pressured the military junta to reform. This two-track strategy has been controversial right from the start. At one point, some, even within ASEAN, called for Myanmar's expulsion or suspension. Most recently, however, others point to the encouraging, albeit glacial, transformation of Myanmar from military to civilian rule.

Rotating Chairs

Apart from problems of implementation on the economic integration front, ASEAN will sooner rather than later be confronted with the immediate challenge of chairmanship. How should it accommodate Cambodia and Myanmar when it is their turn to chair ASEAN? This issue will surface over the next four years – during a most crucial last lap to 2015. Cambodia's will be next year. How will it handle its border dispute with Thailand, and how will Bangkok react? More importantly, will the fissure between Cambodia and Thailand during Phnom Penh's chairmanship further complicate the realisation of Vision 2015?

A similar problem will present itself two years later, in 2014 – on the eve of the 2015 target date. Myanmar has already reclaimed its turn as ASEAN chair, which it was forced to skip in 2006 under Western pressure. The Jakarta summit in May has in-principle agreed to the request, but seems to tie this to further internal reforms within Myanmar. An ASEAN leadership under Myanmar could, however, put at risk the group's annual dialogue with its Western trading partners -- even the East Asia Summit which will involve the United States. Will the US President turn up in Myanmar for the summit?

ASEAN is clearly facing serious bumps along the road to Vision 2015 -- at a juncture it can ill afford. This calls for strong and clear-minded leadership. After Indonesia this year, who will provide it to salvage the ASEAN Community?

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