

Role of Non-state actors in fostering greater ASEAN Integration

First of all, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the Foreign Policy Study Group for inviting me to present my paper on the “Role of Non-state actors in fostering greater ASEAN Integration”. I also wish to state that the views presenting in the paper are my own and that they do not represent either the Myanmar ISIS or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Myanmar.

Since the Treaty of **Westphalia**, the nation-states had been prominent actors in the international arena. International Relations is defined as relations between nation-states. However, since the globalization process has been gaining momentum, government to government process only is not considered sufficient in pursuing political and economic matters. Especially in social cooperation and integration between states, the need for people to people relations has become more important. In the globalization and regionalization processes, all stakeholders either States or Non-state actors have become essential players. The states also need to recognize the role of the Non-state actors such as International Non-governmental Organizations (INGOs), Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), Multinational Corporations (MNCs), Civil Societies and Social Institutions in international relations.

In the international arena before, Non-state actors’ role was less important even in the ASEAN. But after the 1997 financial crisis, the role of the Non-state actors was broadened in the regional integration process of the ASEAN. Among a network of many Non-state actors in ASEAN, the ASEAN-Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN ISIS), Solidarity for Asian People’s **Advocacy** (SAPA), ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC) and ASEAN People’s Forum (APF) are prominent in the regional integration process.

As for the time constraints, I will omit the details of the abovementioned institutions in my presentation and please read it in my paper.

ASEAN Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN ISIS) was formed in 1988 with think tanks of the original five members of ASEAN namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand and was joined by those of Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Brunei and Myanmar in 1995, 1997, 1999, 2000 and 2012 respectively. Even though the ASEAN ISIS was formed to contribute strategic analysis as inputs for the policy makers of the ASEAN countries, it has been transformed as Track 2 network recognized by the ASEAN governments.

As Track 2 institution, ASEAN ISIS has provided policy inputs to the policy makers of the Association ranging from regional peace and security, economic challenges and current regional issues to enhancement of prosperity and well being of

the people in the region. It has also provided venues for the experts and scholars to exchange views on various issues, for better understanding of issues and helping find the solutions.

ASEAN ISIS is also considered as an important bridge between the policy makers and the civil society too. It is also cooperating with other regional institutions in conducting seminars, conferences and meetings to be able to exchange and discuss on issues which are of interest to both parties.

Another important network for ASEAN is the Solidarity for Asian People's Advocacy (SAPA). SAPA is a network of non-governmental organizations, and civil societies with a working group on ASEAN.

SAPA has engaged with ASEAN on the drafting process of the ASEAN Charter and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD). It has also enhanced cooperation among civil society groups in order to effectively interact with the governmental organizations of ASEAN. SAPA has also broadened the involvement of civil societies in the ASEAN process and also encouraged civil society groups to improve communication, cooperation and coordination among themselves.

SAPA has engaged with ASEAN on various issues such as democracy, human rights, sustainable development, labour, migration, climate change, **indigenous** peoples' rights, gender and child's rights.

One of the Non-state actors that deal with civil societies in ASEAN is the ASEAN Civil Society Conference (ACSC). ACSC was first initiated by the Malaysian government and held parallel to the 11th ASEAN Summit in Kuala Lumpur in December 2005. The ACSC was then recognized and supported by the ASEAN Leaders at the Summit. ACSC was considered as forum for civil society organizations from ASEAN to present their ideas, collaborate on the common interests and attempt to interconnect with ASEAN officials on common issues.

The ACSC is considered as a platform for civil societies with different backgrounds in political, economic, social and cultural fields to share views on the common interest and to explore solutions for the challenges faced by the region. The most important aspect of the ACSC is that it is able to interact with ASEAN Leaders during the ASEAN Summit.

In regional integration, people to people relationship is considered as an essential factor and the ASEAN People's Forum (APF) is the one of the network that deals with people to people engagements among ASEAN member countries.

The ASEAN People's Forum (APF) was initiated by Thailand and ASEAN civil society groups. The APF is considered as a unique platform for People-to People engagements and provided chance for the civil society groups to discuss issues

confronting the region, articulate common positions and develop joint actions.

A unique attribute of the APF is that it has established a two-way processes; domestic issues are discussed in the regional format and regional issues with domestic interests are highlighted in the community level group. The APF has been encouraging regional civil societies to address the ASEAN issues among themselves and within ASEAN institutions as well.

Both State and Non-state actors play significant roles in the regional integration process. While the State established institutions contribute to the regional integration by laying down rules and procedures necessary for the integration, the Non-state actors raise the awareness of the people on the integration, clarify the pros and cons of the integration to the people and cushion the side effects of the integration.

The role of the Non-state actors in the regional integration processes can be categorized into three different **facets** – political, economic and socio-cultural.

One of the purposes described in the ASEAN Charter is “to create a single market and production base which is stable, prosperous, highly competitive and economically integrated with effective facilitation for trade and investment in which there is free flow of goods, services and investment” whereas ASEAN Economic Blueprint adopted at the 13th ASEAN Summit on 20 November 2007 in Singapore stated that “ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) shall be the goal of regional economic integration”.

The infant industries and SME sectors of some member states are worried that with the liberalization of trade, services and investment, they could not compete with the more advanced members of the Association and they could not survive the process. By explaining the advantages of the liberalization and outlining the necessary measures, the Non-state actors can minimize the concern of these industries, at the same time encourage the respective governments to create necessary environment to protect these industries.

With the free flow of investments and economic development, this may bring in problems of balancing between economic growth and environmental **deterioration**. In this regard, the Non-state actors could raise the awareness of the people on environmental preservation, sustainable development and green economy and with the cooperation of the people to observe and monitor projects which are harmful to the environment. They can also urge the government of the respective country to pursue sustainable development and implement measures to preserve and protect the environment.

ASEAN is one of the most diverse form of regional organizations in the world in terms of political institutions. There is an absolute monarchy, a constitutional monarchy, democratic governments, socialist government and even used to have military government in the region. ASEAN is aim to integrate these different political systems by building a just, democratic and harmonious environment where member states refrain to use force in solving disputes.

In a just and democratic environment human rights and rule of law are the most essential factors. Without human rights and rule of law, democratic norms and values could not be flourished. In this regard, the Non-state actors are needed in order to educate the people on human rights and rule of law. The role of the Non-state actors is more important in this **facet** because in the process of democratization, the Non-state actors can play a **pivotal** role in raising the awareness of the people on democratization process and at the same time encourage respective governments to safeguard human rights and practice the rule of law.

Since the establishment of ASEAN, no tensions have been escalated into armed conflicts. A peaceful settlement of disputes is enshrined in the ASEAN Charter and the Non-state actors' contribution to this cause is immeasurable. At regional workshops, meetings, conferences and seminars organized by Non-state actors like ASEAN ISIS, experts and scholars in various fields as well as officials from member states can discuss various issues confronting the region, share their different views, explore many possible solutions and can defuse the tensions also.

The contribution of Non-state actors in the realization of Socio-Cultural Community building is also important. One of the characteristics of the ASEAN Socio-cultural Community is to build the ASEAN Identity. As South East Asia is multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious region with own different histories, culture and civilization, mutual understanding among the countries and peoples and consolidation of a sense of unity in diversity are imperative in finding the common identity. To this end, the Non-state actors could raise the awareness of the people on the ASEAN Identity, on how to share history and civilization among member countries and respective peoples and on how to promote people to people relations to enhance understanding between them.

During the previous government in Myanmar, Non-state actors such as civil societies were not recognized and that only state sponsored organizations were allowed to establish. Since President U Thein Sein's present government was formed, civil societies have emerged with the government's encouragement and they are now playing much bigger role in Myanmar's political, economic and social activities.

Civil societies in Myanmar are now collaborating in peace talks between the Government and some ethnic national groups, helping the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in the Kachin State and supporting the relieve efforts in the Rakhine

State. They are also encouraging Myanmar people to raise their awareness on democratization. By collaborating with the government, civil societies are promoting and safeguarding human rights situation in the country and also helping with the rule of law.

With such noble efforts, civil societies are supporting the government to build Myanmar as a responsible member of the ASEAN and in the international community as well.

To successfully realize the ASEAN regional integration, concerted efforts of all stakeholders are needed. While respective governments are laying down policies and measures for integration, the peoples should also comply with those policies and measures. At the same time, the governments need to make due consideration of the opinions and sentiments of the people on those policies and measures.

The role of the Non-state actors is **pivotal** in this respect. Non-state actors can act as a medium between government and people. Non-state actors of the member states can provide strategic inputs to their respective governments by discussing among them different views, opinions and concerns of their peoples. They can also clarify policies and measures of the governments to the people and encourage them to comply with.

In conclusion, in the process of regional integration and ASEAN Community building, the role of Non-state actors is needed to be encouraged because without the involvement of the Non-state actors, a gap between governments and peoples would be very difficult to bridge.

I thank you.

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