

Ulasan Buku / *Book Review*

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Regional Community Building in East Asia: Countries in Focus, Lee Lai To and Zarina Othman (eds.), New York, USA, Routledge, 2017

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This book is actually a collection of essays written by local academicians or scholars on the views of respective Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries towards building a regional community. The authors begin their articles by explaining on the historical background of the country including the establishment of it and how they were formed or accepted into ASEAN. They then continued to highlight the advantages of respective country from being a member of ASEAN and how ASEAN has contributed towards the development of their country.

One very interesting point underscored throughout the book was the concept of Asian Values and how it was implemented. All authors agree that one of the concerns by all ASEAN countries when joining ASEAN is the idea of forming Asian Values - a shared value, tradition and principles across the region. It must be noted that these concerns have its basis as these countries are very much diverse not only economically, but also from a political, security and social point of view. The founding fathers are well developed while the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) are still inching in trying to close the economic gap with the rest of the members. Brunei, Indonesia and Malaysia are Islamic countries, while the rest practices Buddhism, Confucianism or Christianity. However, ASEAN managed to navigate itself around this issue. Peou, for example, pointed that this shared values are successful in ASEAN due to the believe that countries have accepted the fact that common cultural similarities do not guarantee brotherhood, but tolerance of differences seals any pact. He took Cambodia's experience at war with Thailand and Vietnam – countries with similar cultural believes but at neck-to-neck with each other at one time. This was supported by Situmorang who pointed out that ASEAN, in implementing Asian Values, could learn from Indonesia's Pancasila principle which emphasized on acceptance and that unity can be achieved despite diversity.

The ASEAN Community consisted of 3 main pillars – political security (APSC), economics (AEC) and social cultural (ASCC). These 3 pillars were then expanded by having Blueprints and Roadmap to clarify directions, targets and actions to be done by every Member Country to achieve ASEAN Community 2015. What is interesting to note in this book is emphasis was given more to the achievements and benefits deriving from the AEC despite acknowledging that economy cannot be sustained without security and socio-cultural balance. In explaining the importance of APSC, majority of authors only provided a one-liner affirming the commitment of respective countries in implementing APSC. This may be contributed to the lack of qualitative or quantitative output from this pillar despite having many security problems i.e. territorial disputes, terrorism, sea piracy, etc. It was only Malaysia and Philippines that highlighted their efforts under APSC. Zarina and Nor Azizan focuses on efforts under ASEAN Defence Ministerial Meeting (ADMM), collaborative control of sea piracy in the Malacca Straits with Indonesia and Singapore, as well as establishing an anti-terrorism centre think tank. Hernandez told us the numerous efforts taken by the Philippines government in disaster management including the establishment of various legislation and agencies that caters to the mitigation of disaster and welfare of the victim – both which is open to other countries to learn from.

In an extension to the above topic, it is noted that all author, even the editor in his introduction, keep on harping that ASEAN's has succeeded in handling security issues. They glorified the way ASEAN handled the Cambodia conflict in the 1980s by saying that it is a proof of ASEAN as a cohesive regional association. However, as time progresses, many have argued that ASEAN has in a sense, failed. This can be seen in the slow or even no progress in dealing with recent continuous issues or tensions such as South China Seas dispute, the Rohingya boat people, human rights atrocity in Myanmar and the sea piracy or terrorism in South Philippines. To some of these issues, this slow or no progress may be attributed to the non-interference policy uphold by ASEAN as they are considered as domestic problems. As admitted by all authors, despite pledging to unite, each ASEAN Member Country still hold steadfast to their sovereignty and sense of nationalism and thus refuses any outside interference in their domestic dealings. Further to this, as there is no enforcement mechanism available in ASEAN, countries are at their leisure to even refuse to discuss issues that are not beneficial to them.

Overall, the book is a very good read especially for novices to ASEAN history and structure. It explains the history of each country in detail which allows readers to understand how nationalism interplayed with foreign policy and indirectly charted the direction of ASEAN. Throughout the book, it was clear how despite protecting one's interest, Member Countries are accommodating for the sake of mutual development. In moving forward, more can be studied especially the impact and success of ASEAN Community 2015 and with the changes of the world order, if ASEAN is still relevant.

Mohd Ikbal bin Mohd Huda
Centre for Policy and Global Governance
Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
43600 UKM Bangi
Selangor
MALAYSIA
E-mail: ibahuda@ukm.edu.my