

POLITICAL CRISIS PUT TO TEST CREDIBILITY OF ASEAN

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Abstract

ASEAN is widely applauded for its commendable performance of last forty years. Keeping in view the successful integration of ASEAN countries it is recognized as one of the best examples of regionalism. In its life of more than 40 years it has achieved unprecedented progress in assimilating its member states to get their concerted cooperation in various areas. However, despite tremendous performance for last forty years in the socio-economic and cultural fields it has failed to address problems of human rights violations in its member countries. Moreover, political disputes among its member countries also continue to challenge the credibility of this otherwise successful organization. The failure of ASEAN to address the issue of violation of human rights in Myanmar is the major issue that is inviting major criticism from the rest of the world. Recent political crises in Thailand also exposed the vulnerabilities of ASEAN because due to these crises the scheduled ASEAN summit in Thailand at Pattaya had to be cancelled. So, these types of issues have put to test the true mettle of ASEAN to deal with them. This article aims to define establishment of the Association of Southeast Asian States and to highlight its performance since its birth. Keeping in view the contentious political disputes among its members and issues of human rights violations in its member countries the article will also discuss the future of this organization.

Introduction

ASEAN is a 10 member geo-political and economic organisation of the Southeast Asian countries. The Association of Southeast Asian

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Nations or ASEAN was established on 8th August 1967 in Bangkok by the five original Member Countries, namely, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand. Later on, Brunei Darussalam joined on 8th January 1984, Vietnam on 28th July 1995, Lao PDR and Myanmar on 23rd July 1997, while Cambodia was the last country to become its member on 30th April 1999. As of 2006, the ASEAN region has a population of about 560 million, a total area of 4.5 million square kilometers, a combined gross domestic product of almost US\$ 1,100 billion, and a total trade of about US\$ 1,400 billion¹. The motivations for the birth of ASEAN were the desire for a stable external environment (so that its members' governing elite could concentrate on nation building), the common fear of communism, reduced faith in or mistrust of external powers in the 1960s, as well as the aspiration for national economic development; not to mention Indonesia's ambition to become a regional hegemon through regional cooperation and the hope on the part of Malaysia and Singapore to constrain Indonesia and bring it into a more cooperative framework². Its aims include the acceleration of economic growth, social progress, cultural development among its members, the protection of the peace and stability of the region, and to provide opportunities for member countries to discuss differences peacefully.

The ASEAN Declaration states that the aims and purposes of the Association are: (1) to accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region and (2) to promote regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law in the relationship among countries in the region and adherence to the principles of the United Nations Charter³.

ASEAN spent almost the whole first decade of its existence developing and refining the concepts that form the basis of its work and methods of cooperation. In those early years its ministerial and other meetings became occasions for fostering trust and goodwill, for developing the habit of working together informally and openly⁴.

However, at the First ASEAN Summit in Bali in February 1976, the member countries signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia, which spelled out the basic principles for their relations with one another and the conduct of the association's programme for cooperation. The treaty envisaged, mutual respect for the independence, sovereignty, equality, territorial integrity and national identity of all nations, the right of every state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion or coercion, non-interference in the internal affairs of one another, settlement of differences or disputes by peaceful means, renunciation of the threat or use of force and effective cooperation among themselves⁵. So, following the principles and guidelines, outlined in this treaty this organization embarked on its journey towards the achievement of its objectives. Since then it has achieved significant economic growth and cooperation in various fields including trade. Free trade area has been major field where ASEAN has got registered impressive record. But apart from that in political field so far it has managed to prevent occasional bilateral tensions from escalating into confrontation among its members. But these bilateral tensions among its member states continue to beg the attention of ASEAN for their resolution or to keep them out of their multilateral relations because these problems can have significant impact on the multilateral cooperation of its member countries. Moreover, the issues like internal political disputes in its member countries also need careful handling by ASEAN as to avoid the wide ranging criticism from rest of the world because it has resulted in the violation of human rights. Therefore, countries outside the ASEAN region question the credibility of this otherwise most vibrant organization.

Political crisis in ASEAN region

Since its establishment in 1967, except political issues, ASEAN achieved unparalleled success in its life of more than forty years in socio-economic fields. It is because of ASEAN's impressive record in

economic and trade fields that it is widely praised. The ASEAN has also been able to prevent the bilateral political disputes among its members from escalating in full scale conflicts. But the issues of internal political crises in its member countries continue to invite criticism from the opponents of ASEAN because these internal political crises have resulted in violation of human rights. In this regard the suppression of political opponents by the military junta in Myanmar is the most criticized issue in the ASEAN region. Moreover, the failure of ASEAN to compel Myanmar to respect political opponents has also exposed the credibility of ASEAN. It was evident from the behavior of its members at the last ASEAN summit held in Singapore in November 2007. The rift among the members of this 10- member Association of Southeast Asian States, at the last ASEAN summit held in Singapore in November 2007, was visible when scheduled briefing of UN special envoy to Burma, Ibrahim Gambari, was cancelled at the last moment because of the Myanmar's objection. It really exposed the unity of ASEAN countries in their thought and action. Failure of ASEAN to maintain unity in the thought and action of its member countries resulted in severe criticism against ASEAN from its critics. However, at the end of summit talks the leaders of Southeast Asian nations signed a charter which is said to be a landmark in the history of ASEAN. The charter sets out principles and rules for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for the first time and creates a regional human rights body – though without spelling out what authority the body will have⁶. The charter also provides mandate for promotion of democracy, rule of law, good governance, protection of human rights and non-aggression and to reject unconstitutional regime change, etc. At the same time charter also reaffirms principle of 'non-interference'. So, the critics of ASEAN argue that charter will make no difference because until and unless the principle of non-interference is there no body can expect the implementation of charter. Analysts said the charter did not go far enough and wondered whether military-run Myanmar, given its September

crackdown on dissent, would comply. Seemingly, the reaffirmation of principle of non-interference undermines all the provisions that are made in the charter. Hence, the charter is toothless. The 10 member organization of Southeast Asian countries will be remembered more as a shambles than the celebration of the beginning of a new era. ASEAN's leaders were in particular expected to show the world progress on the Myanmar issue, but ended up looking more disunited - if not outright cowardly⁷. Politically, the region's leaders also seem torn between country and community. The "fundamental importance" of "sovereignty" and "non-interference" still comes before any talk of ensuring democracy in their new charter. ASEAN's charter states 'non-interference in members' domestic affairs'. But this kind of ideal does not fit with the contemporary world; Burma's crisis does not stop within its borders, but spreads to other areas in the region. Burma's instability threatens others' stability in the region⁸. As the threat of Myanmar's political instability is regional in nature, therefore, it must not be treated as an internal matter of Myanmar, rather a collective approach should be adopted to deal with this problem. So, the issue of Myanmar crisis has shattered the regional bloc's credibility and deeply embarrassed the advocates of ASEAN who have been talking of ASEAN's ability to stop these types of issues from escalating into regional crises. ASEAN's move to take action against Myanmar has been objected even by its member countries on the pretext of this issue being internal matter of Myanmar. Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia did not want the group to set a new precedent of interfering in a member state's affairs, and generally objected to ASEAN taking a hard line against Myanmar. Even sanctions were ruled out once again⁹. So the bickering among members at the last summit held in 2007 revealed deep divisions among ASEAN members, with the Philippines strongly criticising the regime and pressing for the release of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Analysts believe that ASEAN's continued commitment to 'non-interference' will tend to limit the capacity of member states to force others to adopt a uniform approach. More recently even the

Secretary General of the United Nations Mr. Ban Ki Moon was barred by the military junta in Myanmar to meet pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi during his visit to Myanmar in July 2009. Western countries have criticized ASEAN for being too "soft" in its approach of promoting human rights and democracy in the junta-led Myanmar. Despite global outrage at the military crack-down on peaceful protesters in Yangon, ASEAN has refused to suspend Myanmar as a member and also rejected proposals for economic sanctions. This has caused concern as the European Union, a potential trade partner, has refused to conduct free trade negotiations at a regional level for these political reasons. International observers view it as a "talk shop", which implies that the organization is "big on words but small on action"¹⁰.

During the 12th ASEAN Summit in Cebu, several militant groups staged anti-globalization and anti-Arroyo rallies. According to the militants, the agenda of economic integration would negatively affect industries in the Philippines and would cause thousands of Filipinos to lose their jobs. They also viewed the organization as "imperialistic" that threatens the country's sovereignty¹¹. So, the non-compliance of ASEAN members to the calls of their organization has virtually justified the pressure of the countries outside the ASEAN to suspend the membership of Myanmar because neither it is abiding the rules of ASEAN nor respecting the plea of United Nations to respect the human rights as outlined in the charter of United Nations. The charter signed by the ASEAN countries during the last summit of this organization in November 2007 is said to be a response on the part of ASEAN countries to avoid the criticism of the world on the issue of violation of human rights in the ASEAN region. Because the charter provides for the establishment of a regional human rights body to check the violation of human rights in this region. However, the critics of ASEAN are skeptical about the implementation of the provisions of that charter due to the reaffirmation of the principle of non-interference in the same charter. It is not only the Myanmar issue that is invoking international

criticism against this organization but recent political crises in Thailand has also equally created critical environment for ASEAN. Due to severe political crises and consequent protests in Thailand, have scheduled ASEAN summit had to be cancelled. The cancellation of the ASEAN Summit scheduled to be held in Thailand on April 11 was a disaster not just for the host country but for the entire grouping of Southeast Asian states. Unless the organisation dusts itself off and resumes normal functioning, it can change the path of Asian regionalism and hinder efforts to deal with the global financial and economic crisis¹². Some will conclude from the Summit's cancellation that ASEAN is broken and cannot be taken seriously. Those who have long criticised ASEAN as a mere talkshop might feel vindicated when the shop cannot even be open for talk. At the other extreme, ASEAN loyalists may claim that the group has been through crises and that this too will pass¹³. The crises may pass as claimed by its loyalists but may not end because they are internal problems of ASEAN members and keeping in view the application of the principle of non-interference no body can expect the end to the issues especially of human rights violations in the ASEAN member countries. On the pretext of the principle of non-interference each and every move by ASEAN in this regard will be deterred by its members. Even this principle of non-interference has proved to be a stumbling block in the way of other regional organizations also. SAARC is the closest example in this regard. The charter of the SAARC outlines that under the principle of non-interference, internal political disputes and bilateral political disputes among and between the member countries of the SAARC will never be discussed. Since then bilateral and internal political disputes of the SAARC countries continue to haunt its progress. Similarly, the demerit of the principle of non-interference in the case of ASEAN can't be ruled out either. So far it has challenged the credibility of ASEAN but in future it may seriously hamper the progress of this fast growing organization. These political crises can have disturbing impact on the other activities of this organization. Controversy over the use of 'soft power' (trade or economic sanctions) against the

defiant members of the organization may lead to further divisions among the member countries of ASEAN. The rift among members can disturb their cooperation within organization on the other issues of common interest. This is evident from the model of SAARC, where bilateral political disputes among its members have left the organization in slow progress. The bilateral political disputes among SAARC countries continue to disturb the trade and economic affairs of the organization. Therefore in order to avoid impact of the internal political issues on the overall performance of ASEAN, the controversial subjects need to be addressed. The principle of non-interference needs critical review to avoid controversy among members for the sake of smooth progress and credibility of ASEAN.

Conclusion

Established in 1967 with the aims of the acceleration of economic growth, social progress, cultural development among its members, the protection of the peace and stability of the region, Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is widely recognized in the international community as an example of enlightened and successful regionalism. But what precisely constitutes the nature and measure of its achievements is the question of its critics. No wonder it has achieved remarkable progress in socio-economic and other areas of cooperation among its member countries. The 10-member ASEAN has successfully promoted cooperation and dialogue in the region and become a "bridge builder" among countries in the greater scope of East Asia. The biggest achievement of ASEAN in the past 40 years of its existence since 1967 was that the region was able to enjoy peace and stability that allowed it to focus its energy, time and resources on the economic development of countries in Southeast Asia. But the issues of political disputes among and within its member countries continue to challenge the credibility of this otherwise vibrant organization. ASEAN's ability to deal with the crisis of internal nature in its member countries in last two years has exposed its weakness before the principle of non-interference.

Failure of ASEAN to address the problems of human rights violation has led the rest of world to criticize it. Moreover, rift among its member countries over these political issues has put to test this organization in maintaining its viability and credibility. There is no unity in the thought and action of ASEAN members on the regional political issues as evident by their failure to demonstrate the same during the last summit of ASEAN in 2007 in Singapore. Further, the cancellation of the scheduled 14th ASEAN summit in Thailand also exposed the vulnerability of ASEAN to the crises in region. Keeping in view these factors the critics of ASEAN question its credibility in future. Therefore, members of this otherwise successful organization should rationalize the use of the principle of non-interference to shed off the criticism against ASEAN and to ensure its credibility.

References

¹ <http://www.ASEANsec.org/64.htm>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ASEAN>

³ <http://www.ASEANsec.org/64.htm>

⁴ <http://www.ASEANsec.org/328.htm>

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ <http://www.dawn.com/2007/11/21/int2.htm>

⁷ Alex Au, http://atimes01.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IK27Ae03.html

⁸ WAI MOE, http://www.irrawaddy.org/article.php?art_id=9369

⁹ Alex Au, http://atimes01.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/IK27Ae03.html

¹⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ASEAN#Criticism>

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Simon Tay, ASEAN remains important, http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=2009\04\29\story_29-4-2009_pg3_5

¹³ *ibid*