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MAKING ASEAN RELEVANT

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OVER THE weekend (January 13 and 14, 2007) the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) held its 12th Summit in Cebu City, after a controversial postponement in December last year.

The Summit produced some significant agreements. These include the Mutual Recognition Arrangement on Nursing Services, which makes it possible for nurses with at least three years of experience in their home countries to practice in other ASEAN countries without having to go through additional licensing requirements; the Declaration on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers, which, albeit limited, at last recognizes the contributions and needs of migrant workers in the region; and the blueprint for the proposed ASEAN Charter that seeks to formalize rules of engagement in the regional body. ASEAN Leaders are hopeful that initiatives like these will bring it closer to the dream of an ASEAN Community and the ambition



Protest actions during the 12th ASEAN Summit (top, above).

of a single market by 2020.

But while ASEAN is nearing its 40th year, it remains government-centered and involves highly specialized groups and business lobby, making it vague, inaccessible and unresponsive to citizens of the region. This is unfortunate because there are clear economic, political and social concerns that require a regional response.

First, ASEAN countries face common problems. Security and the impact of counter-terrorism on the people, health problems like the avian flu and the spread of HIV/AIDS, environmental problems like the haze from Malaysia and

Indonesia affecting neighboring countries, intra-ASEAN migration, and contending claims in the South China Sea are just among the many issues shared in the region.

Second, international capital sees ASEAN as a region. The contagion that spread during the 1997 financial crisis showed that capital was running away from the region, not just from specific countries, despite attempts by countries (the Philippines



included) to differentiate themselves from the others. Many corporations, particularly Northeast Asian ones, are vertically and horizontally integrated within the region. The many regional initiatives are now designed precisely to pave ease of operation for the regionally integrated corporate set up.

Third, ASEAN countries need to act in concert in multilateral forums by supporting common positions. It can take its cue from the African Union and the European Union, which are known to submit common positions in negotiating bodies like the World Trade Organization (WTO). Rarely have ASEAN countries come together on a single position. In the WTO it was only to support Supachai Panitchpakdi's bid for the post of Director General in 2002. It was not able to come to the aid of fellow member Cambodia in its accession process. Cambodia ended up having to offer more than existing members offered initially, and giving up many of the flexibilities allowed for least developed countries.

Fourth, regional mechanisms for redress are urgently needed, particularly in the area of human rights, to counterbalance state-sponsored violence against the people especially in countries that do not have national human rights mechanisms. Despite its years, ASEAN has yet to develop a regional practice in human rights the way other regional groups like the African Union, the Organization of American States and Europe have.

The ASEAN has failed to substantially address these concerns. Despite many glitzy declarations, it lacks teeth for effective implementation. It operates on the limited economic paradigm of trade liberalization and opening up of markets. This is partly a result of its inability to plan with the people and its failure to include citizens' participation.

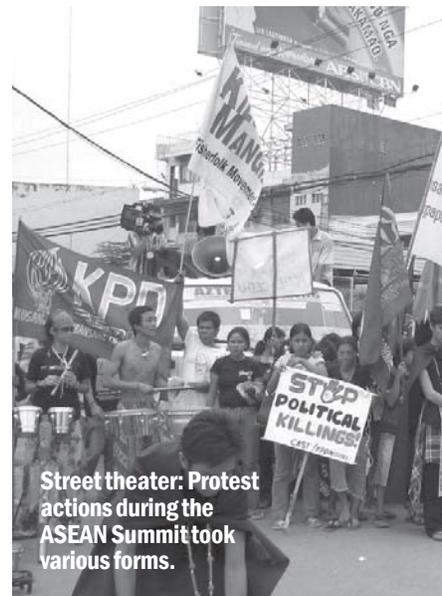
To be truly relevant, it is crucial that ASEAN now



People's rage: Protesters burn President Arroyo's effigy (above); policemen grab a rallyist (page 29).

To earn the confidence of and gain credibility from its own citizens, ASEAN must clearly embrace the principles of human rights and democracy, and immediately create a regional human rights body for the monitoring and redress of abuses.

highlight cooperation as a framework for the community-building process. ASEAN trade and economic agreements are designed in favor of facilitating competition through clear rules and institutional reforms. In trade it is limited to the abolition of tariffs and opening up of markets, and using regional agreements to leverage other agreements with countries outside of the region. The preferential nature of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), for instance, has been eroded by ASEAN members' compulsion to sign free trade and economic partnership agreements left and right. As of September 2006, ASEAN



Street theater: Protest actions during the ASEAN Summit took various forms.



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members were involved in a total of 128 free trade agreements, 48 of which had already been signed or are under implementation. All these agreements have targets and completion dates that approximate AFTA's own targets and dates.

It is high time that ASEAN went beyond trade liberalization and opening up as the main vehicle for integration. Instead it should reconsider cooperation as a framework of integration. There is a big need for, and hence huge opportunities offered by, cooperation in technology, education, infrastructure, movement of labor (both skilled and unskilled), and the creation of complementarity by encouraging regional production planning. ASEAN

should be able to embark on mutually beneficial regional projects, like catch-up cooperative schemes and new development finance to assist poorer, newer members especially as well as older members address income and access gaps within their countries. ASEAN should be a source of an alternative economic model for the region, drawing from the successful lessons of say, Vietnam, Malaysia and even Singapore, which have used patently heterodox policy.

ASEAN would be able to develop constituencies for an ASEAN Community by looking at and addressing the repercussions of liberalization and the impact of regional integration. Automatic review clauses should be included in all

its agreements, to enable members to assess whether such agreements benefit their citizens as hoped, and create flexibilities that will enable them to address the negative impacts. Comprehensive agreements must directly benefit the broadest segments of the population. A regional labor and social protection charter is a useful first step.

On the socio-political front, it is globally recognized that human rights and democracy are most urgent concerns for ASEAN to address. The people of the region face continued repression and insecurity caused by, among others, the surge in political killings and the rollback of democratic space in the Philippines; the lack of media freedom in many countries such as Malaysia and Singapore; the military dictatorship and impunity in Burma; the return of military adventurism in Thailand without a clear plan for the return of civilian supremacy; and the failure to justly address the roots of persisting internal conflicts in areas like Aceh and Irian Jaya. To earn the confidence of and gain credibility from its own citizens, ASEAN must clearly embrace the principles of human rights and democracy, and immediately create a regional human rights body for the monitoring and redress of abuses.

Finally, ASEAN should involve people's participation in all its processes. It should systematically harness civil society input the same way that the business sector through the ASEAN Business Advisory Council is included in its processes. A community can never be complete without the people.

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