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Cambodia's Engagement with ASEAN: Lessons for Timor Leste

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- ✚ design and conduct trainings to civil servants and general public to build capacity in various topics especially in economic development and international cooperation;
- ✚ participate and share ideas in domestic, regional and international forums, workshops and conferences;
- ✚ promote peace and cooperation among Cambodians, as well as between Cambodians and others through regional and international dialogues; and
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Abstract:

ASEAN is an organisation dedicated to peace and stability and its prerequisite is that a prospective member state should maintain its internal stability and order before it engages itself in a larger community of nations in Southeast Asia.

Cambodia's engagement with ASEAN was a long and arduous process. It began with a deliberate and careful assessment of Cambodia's new foreign policy, one that started since 1993 after the formation of the Royal Government of Cambodia arising from the UN-organised elections. Once it was decided by Cambodian leaders that the country should opt for open regionalism and engage itself with its neighbours in Southeast Asia and the rest of the world, preparations for entry into ASEAN began in earnest.

The process of engagement involved all levels of Cambodian society from officialdom to civil society. In addition to the encouragement of ASEAN Leaders, Secretary-General of ASEAN played a crucial role.

Despite obvious differences in culture and colonial history, the Cambodian engagement in ASEAN, in the writer's view, brings a message of hope and promise to Leaders, officials and the people of Timor Leste. It is possible for this country to join ASEAN if there is a strong, visible national commitment to and understanding of ASEAN and its objectives.

This paper documents the various stages that Cambodia went through in joining ASEAN including its accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC) in 1994 to its formal admission in 1999. Cambodia became the 10th member of ASEAN, and has since been an active participant in its processes and activities. The Cambodian experience demonstrates that there are both tangible and intangible benefits to being in ASEAN.

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Cambodia's Engagement with ASEAN: Lessons for Timor Leste

By Din Merican*

Introduction

The paper is a historical overview of Cambodia's engagement with ASEAN and seeks to draw some lessons from the Cambodian experience in the context of Timor Leste's desire and intention to join ASEAN as its 11th member state.

This paper also assumes some knowledge of ASEAN, its institutions, culture and its processes on the part of the Timorese. It will, however, be useful if I can recapitulate ASEAN's origin, aims and objectives. I will then dwell more deeply into with the subject of Cambodia and its engagement with ASEAN. At the end of this paper, I shall draw some lessons from the Cambodian experience, which may prove useful as Timor Leste continues to prepare itself to join ASEAN. This, of course, is looking ahead a few years down the road.

ASEAN, its Origin, Aims and Objectives

ASEAN was established in Bangkok, Thailand when 5 statesmen of vision, Adam Malik (Indonesia), Tun Abdul Razak (Malaysia), Narciso Ramos (The Philippines), S. Rajaratnam

* Mr. Din Merican is Senior Research Fellow, CICP. In the preparation of this paper, the author would like to acknowledge the intellectual contributions of Professor Rudolfo C. Severino, former ASEAN Secretary-General and scholar, and my colleague Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, presently Secretary of State, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Cambodia. Dr Kao was the former Executive Director, The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), Phnom Penh and one of the key proponents of Cambodia's engagement with ASEAN and a respected authority on the subject in his home country. The author also acknowledges the assistance of Dr. Chap Sotharith, the present Executive Director of CICP (www.cicp.org.kh) in the crystallization of my ideas for this paper. However, the views expressed here are strictly his own. He does not implicate them or the institute with which he is associated.

(Singapore) and their host, Thanat Khoman met to discuss the prevailing situation in Southeast Asia, a region troubled by big power rivalries and disputes.

The 3-page document they signed on August 8, 1967, commonly known as *The Bangkok Declaration*, was to create a loose and informal organization, a kind of an old boys' club, at least initially. It was called the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

Some observers and analysts in Southeast Asia and elsewhere regarded this Declaration as an expression of the unwillingness of the founders of ASEAN to allow their differences and disputes to escalate into open conflicts and their determination to cooperate with each other in the pursuit of their common interests. More importantly, it represented their determination to safeguard the region from being dragged into big power conflicts of the time. It was a period of the Cold War, and Southeast Asia was embroiled in the Indo-Chinese War.

The Founding Fathers of ASEAN put a high premium on building mutual trust and confidence, thereby overcoming mutual suspicion and misunderstanding which existed among the peoples of Southeast Asia after centuries of colonialism by the metropolitan powers.

ASEAN is an association of " all States in the Southeast Asian region subscribing to the (ASEAN's) aims, principles and purposes" desiring to " bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity."¹

The foregoing remains the central objective and goal of ASEAN that is often overlooked by observers, analysts, commentators as much as by some Leaders and officials themselves.

ASEAN's aims and purposes are specifically to:

- Accelerate economic cooperation, social progress and cultural development in the spirit of "equality and partnership...to strengthen the foundation for a prosperous and peaceful community..."

¹ Articles 5 and 6, the ASEAN Declaration, Bangkok, August, 8, 1967.

- Promote “regional peace and stability through abiding respect for justice and the rule of law.”
- Promote “active collaboration and mutual assistance” in all fields and in the areas of training and research.
- Promote Southeast Asian studies.

According to Rudolfo Severino, the ASEAN Declaration “sketched out a rudimentary mechanism”². In my view, it was more a rudimentary route, rather than a mechanism as, in their wisdom, the Founding Fathers felt that ASEAN should be less prescriptive in its evolution, focussing on building mutual trust and confidence.

It was only a decade after Bangkok did the first ever Summit meeting of ASEAN leaders take place in Bali, Indonesia in 1976. It was at this meeting that the Leaders decided, among others, to set up a modest Secretariat for the fledging association. It was then that the leaders, rather than the ASEAN Declaration, began the first steps towards some form of institutionalisation.

40 years since, ASEAN still remains a loose arrangement rather than a formal and legalistic one, although its processes and activities have expanded through the years. It was also not until 1976 in Bali, Indonesia that ASEAN Leaders signed a formal *Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia* (TAC).

TAC committed the member states to respect national sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs, rejection of the threat or use of force and the peaceful settlement of disputes. The treaty also called for greater economic and other forms of regional cooperation including the genesis of an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), which finally came to fruition in 1993. Accessing to TAC has since become a requirement for new membership in ASEAN, to which Timor Leste was a signatory in Cebu, Philippines, on January 13, 2007³.

² Rudolfo C. Severino *Southeast Asia In Search of an ASEAN Community* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), p. 3.

³ In 1987, an amendment allowed non-member states to accede to it. Papua New Guinea (1989), China and India (2003), Japan, Pakistan, South Korea and Russia (2004) and Mongolia, New Zealand and Australia (2005) have acceded to TAC.

Less than 2 years earlier, on July 29, 2005, Timor Leste joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Vientiane, Laos, as its 25th member. This shows that ASEAN is receptive and it is only a question of time before Timor Leste becomes a full-fledged member.

In wanting to join the fraternity, Timor Leste needs to understand that what the rather cohesive original ASEAN-5 and later Brunei Darussalam had gone through in the enlargement of its membership. The first lesson was their traumatic experience in bringing about an end to the 2-decade long Cambodian conflict. This was then followed in the second instance by yet another decade, following the signing of the Comprehensive Paris Peace Accords of 1991 and the advent of the United Nations intervention, before national reconciliation, peace and stability could be restored, reinforced and consolidated in Cambodia.

In other words, it took the ASEAN-6 some 2 decades of almost continuous engagement with Cambodia before admitting it into ASEAN. Timor Leste, with almost similar tragic past, could take a leaf or two from the Cambodian experience in particular its engagement in ASEAN.

Cambodia's Engagement with ASEAN

Early Attempts (1967-1978)

Adam Malik, the Foreign Minister of Indonesia, visited Phnom Penh in the early days of ASEAN in 1967 but he could not convince HRH Prince Norodom Sihanouk⁴ to participate in the budding organization. In an interview with Rudolfo Severino on December 10, 2003, the Prince (now King) said that he told Adam Malik that he wanted to maintain Cambodia's neutrality and non-aligned status.

His Majesty said that he was determined to keep his country out of the Vietnam War, make it a "Switzerland of Asia" and protect Cambodia's territorial integrity and national sovereignty. In order to ward off pressures from the United States, Thailand and South Vietnam, he felt that he had to seek support from China and North Vietnam. He would, however, remain a "friend of ASEAN".

⁴ See Norodom Sihanouk, *My War with the CIA* (London: Penguin, 1973) for an account of his efforts to maintain his country's national sovereignty and territorial integrity in a war torn Indochina.

His rather non-committal stance toward Adam Malik's overture would prove to be appropriate at the time. Indeed, during his years in exile after a military coup in 1970, the Prince was able to tap the reservoir of goodwill he had established with the non-Communist yet pro-West Southeast Asia. He did not, so to speak, "burn the bridges" with ASEAN. The original ASEAN-5 continued to engage and support him and his allies during the entire period of the Vietnamese occupation of his country (1979-1989) and in subsequent regional and international efforts to end the Cambodian conflict and rebuild his country.

According to Dr. Kao Kim Hourn, during the period from 1970 to 1975 Cambodia under Marshal Lon Nol failed to seize the opportunity to secure ASEAN membership. This was because of "its intense preoccupation with its civil war with the Khmer Rouge, riots and demonstrations in Phnom Penh, as well as the spread of the war in Vietnam into Cambodia"⁵ when President Richard Nixon decided in May, 1970 to go after the North Vietnamese forces operating deep in the Cambodian territory. In addition, ASEAN leaders then rejected the coup against HRH Prince Sihanouk, as he was still the legitimate Cambodian Head of State.

In other words, even in its early years ASEAN was opposed to the idea of the overthrow of any established constitutional order. This rather latent sentiment of ASEAN leaders is often overlooked. A recent case in point was when in July, 1997 ASEAN deferred Cambodia's membership in the eleventh hour, much to the chagrin of Prime Minister Hun Sen and his Cambodian officials⁶.

After the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975⁷ which coincided with the withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam, the Khmer Rouge's Democratic Kampuchea which evicted the pro-American Lon Nol regime from power cut itself from ASEAN and the rest of the world, except China and its allies. Its foreign policy was decidedly anti-ASEAN and anti-foreign. Its self-imposed isolation policies enabled the Khmer Rouge regime to engage in a destructive agrarian revolution away from the glare of international attention. Some 1-1.5 million died due to summary executions, starvation, disease and sheer exhaustion.

⁵ Kao Kim Hourn, *Cambodia's Foreign Policy and ASEAN: From Non-Alignment to Engagement* (Phnom Penh: The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 2002), p.32.

⁶ The writer who was one of the strong advocates of Cambodia's entry together with Laos and Myanmar was dismayed at and critical of the ASEAN Foreign Ministers' decision to defer Cambodia's admission indefinitely when they met in Kuala Lumpur on July 10, 1997. See Kao Kim Hourn, *op.cit.*

⁷ See William Shawcross, *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and The Destruction of Cambodia* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979) and Ben Kiernan, ed., *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia: The Khmer Rouge, the United States and the International Community* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986)

The Pol Pot regime dismantled political and civic institutions including the civil service⁸. The market economy was destroyed. Banks were closed including the Central Bank, which was, in fact, bombed. Currency was abolished. The cities were emptied and the intelligentsia exterminated. In their place, Pol Pot⁹ sought to create a new Khmer agrarian utopia¹⁰. In short, during the 4 years of the genocidal regime, Cambodia was completely cut off from the region.

ASEAN Re-Engagement with Cambodia (1979-1989)

Vietnam invaded Cambodia and overthrew the Khmer Rouge. It then installed a new regime. For the first time, ASEAN acted collectively to this armed aggression, which was in contravention of international law and a blatant disregard for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Cambodia. ASEAN continued to exercise its diplomacy to mobilise global support against the Vietnamese occupation of the country. It helped to retain Cambodia's seat in the United Nations in favour of, and providing assistance to the coalition of resistance forces led by HRH Prince Sihanouk.

The Cambodian Peace Process (1989-1991) and ASEAN

While pursuing a policy of trying to end the Vietnamese occupation, ASEAN played a key role together with the United Nations to convince all members of the Security Council plus Australia and Japan to seek a comprehensive political settlement to the Cambodian conflict.

At the end of 1989, Vietnam was compelled to withdraw its forces from Cambodian territory. The Cambodian conflict ended with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and ASEAN gained international recognition for its efforts in bringing about an end to the so-called "Cambodian Problem" and the country's isolation during the period of the Vietnamese occupation.

⁸ See Karl D. Jackson, ed., *Cambodia, 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989)

⁹ Philip Short, *Pol Pot: Anatomy of a Nightmare* (New York: Henry Holt & Co, 2004)

¹⁰ See John Marston, *Democratic Kampuchea and the Idea of Modernity* in Judy Ledgerwood, ed., *Cambodia Emerges from the Past: Eight Essays* (DeKalb ILL: Northern Illinois University, 2002)

United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC), Cambodia and ASEAN (1992-1993)¹¹

Following the signing of the Paris Peace Accords, the United Nations was given the mandate to send peacekeepers to maintain the peace and organise the first national elections. The United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia (UNTAC) was created to carry out this UN Security Council mandate. It was also responsible for peace building efforts, which included the drafting of a new constitution, institution capacity building with regard to public administration, and the restoration of the rule of law.

ASEAN member states—Indonesia, Malaysia, The Philippines, Singapore and Thailand—contributed military and police personnel for UNTAC. ASEAN diplomats also played a key role in the Supreme National Council (SNC) of Cambodia led by its President Prince Norodom Sihanouk, offering advice and technical assistance¹².

The SNC was entrusted with the responsibility of safeguarding of Cambodian sovereignty, unity and national independence until such time that the UN-supervised democratic elections in 1993 produced a sovereign government.

Dr. Kao¹³ noted that the end of the Cold War in 1989 contributed to a major shift in Cambodia's foreign policy. Big power rivalry in Southeast Asia ended with the withdrawal of the US forces in Vietnam and the reunification of the country. This was followed by the collapse of the Berlin Wall and with it the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, as result of the formation of the Royal Government of Cambodia after the UN organized national elections of 1993, Cambodian leaders created a new and conducive political environment. Cambodia became more peaceful due to a heightened sense of national reconciliation and a new spirit of hope and openness. A culture of peace emerged as Cambodians saw the possibilities of post conflict prosperity.

The government's efforts to get to get their politics right and put their house in order further encouraged ASEAN to actively pursue the idea of Cambodia's membership. At the same time, Cambodian leaders began to realise that belonging to the ASEAN family would

¹¹ For a Fuller Treatment, see Sorpong Peou, *Conflict Neutralization in the Cambodian War: For Battlefield to Ballot-Box* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)

¹² Deva M. Ridzam, *A Cambodian Journal*, in Fauziah Mohamad Taib ed., *Number One Wisma Putra*, (Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Affairs, 2006), pp.169-82.

¹³ Kao Kim Hourn, *op.cit.*

enhance their legitimacy and security. As a small and impoverished nation, Cambodia would benefit from its neighbours, and from belonging to a very successful group of vibrant and rapidly expanding economies.

New Cambodia's Partnership (Post 1993)

A series of developments within Cambodia further lent itself to its engagement in ASEAN:

May 1993:

- ASEAN recognised the UN-sponsored elections¹⁴.

July 22:

- Cambodia attended the 26th ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Singapore as special guest of the host country.

July 24:

- ASEAN welcomed the formation of the government of national reconciliation.

July 23, 1994:

- At the 27th AMM in Bangkok, Cambodia expressed its interest in acceding to the TAC. It also invited ASEAN Secretary-General, Ajit Singh to visit Phnom Penh.

July 28, 1995:

- Cambodia signed the Instrument of Ratification to TAC and became an Observer in ASEAN at AMM in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Seri Begawan.

December 15:

- Co-Prime Ministers of Cambodia, Prince Norodom Ranariddh and Hun Sen attended the 5th ASEAN Summit in Bangkok.

¹⁴ Kao Kim Hourn and Norbert von Hofmann, *National Elections: Cambodia's Experiences and Expectations* (Phnom Penh: The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 1998)

April, 1996:

- Cambodia submitted Letter of Intent to join ASEAN as a full member to the Indonesian Chair of the ASEAN Standing Committee, Ali Alatas.

May 13, 1997:

- King Norodom Sihanouk welcomed Cambodia's intention to join ASEAN.

May 31, 1997:

- ASEAN Foreign Ministers announced that they would admit Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar together in July at the 30th AMM in Kuala Lumpur¹⁵.

Mid-June, 1997:

- Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Chairman of the ASEAN Standing Committee and the ASEAN Secretary-General, Ajit Singh visited Phnom Penh to seek assurances from the Cambodian government that it would maintain peace and stability before its admission in July.
- Fighting broke out in Phnom Penh. Prince Ranariddh was removed from office.

July 10, 1997:

- ASEAN decided to postpone Cambodia's entry indefinitely.

July 19, 1997:

- An ASEAN Troika team comprising Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, Foreign Affairs Secretary Domingo Siazon of the Philippines, and Thailand's Foreign Minister Prachuab Chaiyasarn met Prime Minister Hun Sen and other Cambodian leaders to mediate and break the impasse.

July 24-29, 1997:

¹⁵ There was concern that Cambodia could be regressing politically into a serious crisis and there could be fresh outbreak of violence as a result of serious differences in the ruling coalition government.

- Foreign Minister Ung Huot and his delegation attended the 30th AMM and the 4th ASEAN Regional Forum as an observer in Kuala Lumpur. Both Laos and Myanmar were admitted while Cambodia's admission was postponed.

August 2, 1997:

- The ASEAN Troika visited Phnom Penh again to meet with Prime Minister Hun Sen.

August 11, 1997:

- A special ASEAN Foreign Ministers' meeting on Cambodia reaffirmed that ASEAN would remain engaged with Cambodia, emphasizing the need for free, fair and credible elections scheduled for July, 1998.

February 14, 1998:

- The ASEAN Troika met in Manila to assess progress on Cambodia.

February 15, 1998:

- The "Friends of Cambodia", an ad hoc group consisting of Australia, Canada, China, the European Union, Japan, New Zealand, Russia and the United States, to exchange assessments and work on possible solutions, centred on the cessation of violence, the fate of Prince Ranariddh, the conduct of free and fair elections, and the participation of all parties in the elections.

March 6, 1998:

- "Friends of Cambodia" met the ASEAN Troika in Manila and endorsed the continuing role of the latter in helping to restore political stability in Cambodia; welcomed the decision of King Norodom Sihanouk to return to Phnom Penh and recognised positive developments with the ceasefire and the return of exiled Cambodian politicians. It also encouraged the Cambodian Government to create a favourable climate for free, fair and credible election scheduled for July 26, 1998.

March 11, 1998:

- Laos and Vietnam supported Cambodia's admission into ASEAN.

March 30, 1998:

- Prince Ranariddh returned to Phnom Penh under the Japanese brokered deal¹⁶.

June 20, 1998:

- Meeting in Bangkok, both the ASEAN Troika and “Friends of Cambodia” endorsed the election programmes for July 26, 1998.

July 26, 1998:

- The first Cambodian organised elections in 2 decades were successfully conducted. 75 observers from ASEAN and more than 700 from the international community were present. 39 political parties took part. Prime Minister Hun Sen’s Cambodian Peoples Party won by a significant margin but did not garner a two-thirds majority to form the Government outright. A coalition was formed with Hun Sen as the sole Prime Minister. Prince Ranariddh would be President of the National Assembly while a Hun Sen stalwart, Chea Sim, would head the newly formed Senate.

April 30, 1999:

- Decision was taken to make Cambodia a full member of ASEAN in December.

In short, it took Cambodia 4 arduous years to be accepted as a member. In explaining his country’s desire to be a member of ASEAN, Prime Minister Hun Sen cited four reasons why he found ASEAN attractive.

To quote Rudolfo Severino on this:

“First was the “regional environment of security, peace and stability, allowing this region to prosper...[and] achieve(d) through a framework of efficient cooperation and consultation based the main principles of the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, especially the principle of non-interference in each other’s internal affairs”. The second was the consensus-building principle in making decisions within ASEAN...the third of ASEAN’s “strengths” the region’s

¹⁶ See “ASEAN Troika Statement”, Manila, March 8, 1998.

reputation for “strong economic growth”...The fourth was ASEAN’s role as “a major international gateway”...”¹⁷

Lessons Learned

My colleague, Chap Sotharith, the incumbent Executive Director, Cambodian Institute of Cooperation and Peace, acknowledges that in the process of preparation for entry, Cambodia achieved a lot in terms of institutional development, legal framework reform, macroeconomic stability, and human resources¹⁸.

Institutional Development and Legal Framework Reform

A Department of ASEAN, later renamed General Department of ASEAN (in 1996) was established within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation in 1993. Led by a Director General, the Department is the ASEAN National Secretariat to coordinate all ASEAN related activities in Cambodia, especially functional cooperation. It also coordinates training and staff development.

The posts of Senior Economic Official for Senior Economic Officials Meetings (SEOM), ASEAN Economic Minister (AEM) and Minister for AFTA (ASEAN Free Trade Area) were created in 1996 at the Ministry of Economy and Finance to deal with economic and financial matters in ASEAN.

The Internal Coordination Network, chaired by the Prime Minister with Ministers in key portfolios as members, was established in 1996 for top-level policy and decision-making on ASEAN. ASEAN Departments were established in the Ministry of Economy and Finance and Ministry of Commerce. In addition, ASEAN offices are located in all front line ministries. An inter-ministerial AFTA Unit was created in 1996 which is chaired by Cambodia’ SEOM leader, whose function is to prepare and finalise CEPT lists.

Cambodia acceded to 20 other agreements in addition to TAC. Some laws were amended and new ones introduced to conform to ASEAN legislation and practices. These included Law on Taxation, Law on Insurance, Investment Laws, Banking Laws and Regulations.

¹⁷ Severino, *op.cit.*, p.66.

¹⁸ See Keat Chhon, *Evolving the Long-Term Vision for the Rehabilitation and Development of Cambodia* (Phnom Penh: The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, 1998)

Human Resource Development

With active participation in dialogues and conferences, Cambodian officials gained considerable experience and proficiency in English. Many officials were sent to courses, workshops and seminars locally and abroad to acquire English language skills, knowledge of customs and immigration practices of ASEAN countries, develop negotiation skills and understand diplomatic practices. But more is still being done in the area of capacity building.

Public Relations and Networking

The Cambodian Government ministries played a key role in promoting public awareness and understanding of the rationale and benefits of Cambodia's engagement in, and its subsequent membership of, ASEAN. The Government made extensive use of national television and radio and the vernacular media. Key ministers and officials often gave interviews through the print and electronic media, and participated in local news conferences.

It would be remiss on my part if I did not mention the crucial role, which was played by civil society organisations, in particular the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP), Cambodia's well-regarded policy think tank, in promoting discourses on ASEAN among the business community, community leaders, NGOs, and academia.

The CICP was established in June 1994 with the generous support and cooperation of Germany's Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. It is a non-partisan and independent institution dedicated to fostering greater understanding of national, regional and international issues that affect Cambodia. In carrying out its mission, the institute sponsors and participates in lectures, seminars, forums, and international conferences. It undertakes training in international relations, foreign policy, economics and politics. It conducts research and publishes books, journals and special papers on peace-building and conflict resolution, economic development issues, foreign policy and security, and ASEAN.

Since its inception, CICP organised 40 conferences, seminars and dialogue sessions on various ASEAN issues and has issued numerous publications on international relations, economics and politics. Its views and comments have some influence on official Cambodian body politic. The CICP, in fact, whispers gently in the ears of power, so to speak.

These forums, conferences, seminars and workshops were essential in preparing Cambodians to understand the meaning of ASEAN membership, its processes and the concept of the ASEAN Way. Concerns about the consequences of joining ASEAN were hotly debated and fears assuaged, and national consensus was built in officialdom and civil society that ASEAN would bring tangible benefits to Cambodia in the long term.

In short term, ASEAN membership would signal Cambodia's re-entry in the world community after years of isolation. It would also promote a culture of peace and the habit of region wide consultation and cooperation in a nation that was once embroiled in a bloody civil war for some two decades.

The CICP's main strength is in its capacity to network with other think tanks in the region and around the world. It formally became a member in 1997 of ASEAN-ISIS which is a group of the most outstanding think tanks in ASEAN with links to think tanks and policy institutes around the world, stretching from the United States and Canada, Europe to China, Japan, Korea and Australia and New Zealand.

ASEAN-ISIS was founded by a group of dedicated intellectuals and academics led by Dr. Noordin Sopiee of the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, Malaysia and Jusuf Wanandi at the Jakarta based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). It was created to serve two objectives. One is to "cooperate among ASEAN think tanks to strengthen ASEAN's cooperation" and the other is "to relate and cooperate with other think tanks in East Asia (the Region) and the World in order to be able to strengthen peace and development and to contribute to world order and peace."¹⁹

Today the ASEAN-ISIS members are Brunei Institute of Policy and Strategic Studies, The Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, Institute of Foreign Affairs (Laos), Institute for International Relations (Vietnam) and the original 5 namely, Center for Strategic and International Studies (Indonesia), The Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Malaysia), Institute for Strategic and Development Studies (Philippines), Singapore Institute of International Affairs and Institute of Security and International Studies (Thailand).

¹⁹ Jusuf Wanandi, "ASEAN-ISIS and Its Regional and International Networking" in Hadi Soesastro, Clara Joewono and Carolina G.Hernandez, eds., *Twenty Two Years of ASEAN-ISIS: Origin, Evolution and Challenges of Track Two Diplomacy* (Jakarta:Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2006), p.31.

The ASEAN Way

The manner in which ASEAN goes about its business has been described as the “ASEAN Way”. This is *characterised by the group’s preference for informality* and less formal arrangements over legal instruments and treaties, the greater *reliance on personal relations* and the *measured pace of institution-building*, the emphasis on the *sovereign equality of members*, and *decision making by consensus*.

This approach has proven to be very successful in promoting solidarity and understanding at the highest levels of officialdom. It has both strength and a weakness. Informality facilitated mutual confidence building. But progress was slow and often vexing.

Current Concerns of ASEAN: The Myanmar Imbroglio

The most formidable challenge is how ASEAN-10 should cope with their domestic political and economic changes. It has become increasingly obvious that member states are giving greater importance to regional political cohesion and economic integration.

In the political sphere, key member states are experiencing new dynamics characterised by generational leadership change (Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore for example), transition towards democracy with increasing concern for human rights and for minorities. In this regard, the current preoccupation of ASEAN over Myanmar’s commitment towards ASEAN has already weakened the organisation’s cohesion, further economic integration and its standing and credibility globally, especially with its Dialogue Partners.

In the light of this disappointment, some member states and others are now of the view that bringing Myanmar into ASEAN was not only premature but also a serious error in judgment. And the question of Timor Leste’s membership will be unfortunately clouded and shaded by this experience.

It is, therefore, quite understandable that having earlier gone through the Cambodian experience and now beset with the Myanmar imbroglio, ASEAN Leaders will be more circumspect, cautious and deliberate in dealing with Timor Leste’s desire and intention to join the association in terms of the pace and timing of its entry.

Timor Leste should nonetheless appreciate that despite this ongoing bitter experience with Myanmar, most ASEAN members are positively inclined to its eventual membership. ASEAN Foreign Ministers at their Retreat in Ubud, Bali in April 2006 made their first move when they agreed that Timor Leste could participate in all the functional cooperation activities of ASEAN. This is certainly a significant step to enable Timor Leste to learn more about ASEAN and its processes as it prepares for eventual entry into the ASEAN family.

It is, therefore, incumbent on Timorese Leaders to address the concerns that some members may have about its prospective membership, the foremost of which is that the government of Timor Leste should get its internal political house in order. In other words, this means that they should their politics right.

In the light of ASEAN's decision taken at its 10th Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in December, 2005 to have a legally bind charter for the association, it is unlikely that Timor Leste's candidacy will be considered until such time as the ASEAN Charter is accepted. At this stage, the time of the ASEAN Charter's finalisation and accent by member states is still a matter of conjecture.

Concluding Remarks

The Cambodian experience is of direct relevance to Timor Leste. Like Timor Leste, Cambodia experienced human tragedy due to years of civil war. It is essentially an agricultural country, which depends on rice exports, tourism and Official Development Assistance (ODA). It has a population of nearly 12 million people and per capita income of USD400 (2005).

Although smaller in terms of population and land area, Timor Leste also has an agricultural base with coffee as its main export. Like Cambodia, Timor Leste is very much a dollarised economy.

Because Cambodia has enjoyed political stability with a democratically elected government since 1993, foreign direct investment is following into the garment manufacturing and tourism sectors. Laws and regulations in English are being harmonised for integration in

ASEAN to enable the private sector to invest in much needed infrastructure such as roads, power and railways. Unemployment and poverty remain serious problems but with expansion, they can be eliminated. Education and healthcare facilities are being upgraded. Plans are now in place for Cambodia to develop its oil and gas resources.

It is worth pointing out that the Cambodian government, which used French in the past, made a very conscious decision to use English and this decision was proven to be a very wise move for its official business with ASEAN member states. It, however, did not discourage Cambodians from learning French, Mandarin and other languages. In its administration, the Khmer language is widely used for official communications.

Timor Leste should decide as soon as possible whether it would adopt English as the only official working language in ASEAN. Using Portuguese alone will be a significant drawback and is costly to the Timorese government and people. Portugal should, therefore, not insist on the use of its language as a condition for its development assistance. After all, within the European Union itself, English has supplanted French as the official language.

Cambodia is today a land of relative peace and stability. It is a much more open society with a free press and a pluralist democracy. Over time, given continued political stability, rapid progress in the development of its human resources coupled with improvements in infrastructure, Cambodia will be able to sustain a higher level of growth through greater regional integration.

While it would be sheer exaggeration to say that all these positive developments in Cambodia have been due entirely to its entry into the family of Southeast Asian nations, there can be no doubt, in my view, that Cambodia's membership in ASEAN helped to create a culture of peace and a very conducive climate for private sector investment in the country's development. Credit must go to the government under Prime Minister Hun Sen and the people of Cambodia for the remarkable progress made since the end of the Cambodian conflict, and especially after the 1998 elections.

From Cambodia, therefore, comes a message of promise and hope for Timor Leste. It is possible, as the Cambodian experience tells us, to look beyond the present to a future of peace, stability and prosperity. But there should be the political will and dogged determination of a government, a people and a nation to keep their house in good order and

be at peace at home and with their neighbours. This is a fundamental point that needs to be repeated and emphasised, as ASEAN remains sensitive to it.

In my opinion, ASEAN will provide the right regional environment for Timor Leste to rise above the ravages of foreign occupation, human tragedy, and tribal conflict, which tend to cloud the possibilities and hopes of a stable and promising future. Tough times do not last, but a determined, courageous and tough people do and can make the difference.

The Timorese government has chosen to be part of ASEAN in stead of the Australian-led Pacific Islands Forum, a wise move of far reaching significance, but it must work in earnest to realise its goal to be the 11th member in the family of Southeast Asian nations. The task is not impossible.

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