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Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship: Challenges for Strengthening Democracy Agenda in ASEAN

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This year marks the fourth time that Indonesia has held the reins of ASEAN chairmanship. Carrying the theme "ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth", Indonesia is determined to direct ASEAN cooperation towards sustainability, enhance ASEAN's relevance in responding to regional and global challenges, and elevate ASEAN's position as the centre of regional economic growth.

Many internal and external parties have pinned their hopes on Indonesia, one of the founding countries of ASEAN and the largest country in ASEAN, to be able to make various breakthroughs and innovations in dealing with various global challenges faced by the region. At global and regional levels, the world is facing global problems, such as global democracy's decline¹, Russia's war in Ukraine, global recession, food crisis, and climate change.

Even though this year's theme focuses more on economic issues, this article emphasizes the importance of highlighting the issue of democracy in the moment of Indonesia's chairmanship. This considers Indonesia's important role as the main promoter of the adoption of democratic principles in ASEAN. In addition, it has been recognized that the future of democracy in ASEAN depends on the political positions and attitudes of countries that already have a better democracy rating. In this context, the journey of institutionalizing the basic values developed in the ASEAN Charter will be heavily coloured by democratic countries, such as Indonesia.²

From three chairmanships, previously in 1976, 2003, and 2011, Indonesia has laid a strong foundation for the enactment of the principles of democracy, law enforcement, good governance, and human rights in ASEAN.

With these historical tracks, the moment of Indonesia's chairmanship in 2023 in the midst of global democracy's decline will be a decisive moment for the future of upholding democratic principles in the Southeast Asian region. Moreover, this moment of chairmanship occurred in the midst of the protracted Myanmar problem which has not found a solution up to now. It is hoped that the Indonesian leadership will be able to come up with solutions that will resolve the Myanmar crisis. While we

¹ IDEA. 30 November 2023. "Global Democracy Weakens in 2022". <https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/global-democracy-weakens-2022>.

² M. Riefqi Muna. 2016. "Demokrasi dan HAM di ASEAN: Kerangka Konseptual" in Ratna Shofi Inayati. 2016. Demokrasi dan HAM di ASEAN. Jakarta. Mahara Publishing. 24.

cannot ignore that Indonesia is one of the countries that is experiencing democratic regression in the domestic sphere, this article addresses the challenges and prospects of Indonesia's chairmanship in strengthening the principles of democracy in ASEAN.

The State of Democracy in ASEAN

When Indonesia succeeded in incorporating the democracy agenda into the ASEAN Concord II, many parties considered this step as a major breakthrough because it succeeded in breaking a long-held taboo in ASEAN over the use of the term "democracy".³ The strenuous steps since this early stage have indeed continued to occur to this day. According to Choiruzzad, there are no signs that ASEAN is really serious about trying to realize its democratic and democratization agenda.⁴ In fact, Thailand, which originally supported Indonesia's agenda, is now problematic with regard to democracy. In May 2014, the Thai military seized power on the grounds of maintaining political stability. This complexity is closely related to the ambiguous situation that has been a debate among ASEAN countries since the beginning, namely whether to carry out the democratization agenda together or to maintain the old norm of not interfering in each other's domestic political affairs.

ASEAN Study Team of Research Centre for Politics-BRIN (previously LIPI), has conducted research on the implementation of democracy and human rights principles in ASEAN for four years (2010-2013). By looking at each ASEAN member state, this research found that although the ASEAN Charter refers to universal declarations and documents, the implementation of democracy in ASEAN is highly dependent on the interpretation and the political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts in each member country.⁵

This research categorized the implementation of democracy in ASEAN into three groups. First, Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines as the first group of countries to focus more on political and security issues to achieve stability and peace at the national and regional levels. However, democracy in these three countries tends to experience a deficit due to ongoing conflicts between the government/military and groups of people who want political independence. In fact, Thailand has been under military rule since 2014.

Second, Singapore, Malaysia, and Brunei Darussalam are the second group that places the fulfilment of economic interests for the welfare of the people as the main pillar compared to the duties and responsibilities of the government in the context of implementing democracy (in the sense of fulfilling people's economic rights) rather than fulfilling political civil liberties.

Third, the four youngest countries in ASEAN, namely Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam as a group of countries that still face many obstacles in implementing democratic principles in a civil and political manner as well as fulfilling socio-economic rights. Meanwhile, the quality of democracy in these countries cannot be separated from external forces or the involvement of large countries that have economic and political interests, especially in the four countries and generally in ASEAN.

Thus, at the procedural stage of fulfilling democracy, ASEAN member countries have tried to implement it, although at different levels, according to their respective political and economic

³ The Habibie Center. June 2014. "The Bali Concord III: Towards a More Common ASEAN Platform on Global Issues", Issue 5. 2. <http://www.habibiecenter.or.id/img/publication/b64cd9143d8ad9f9bbdd228a7994649e.pdf>

⁴ Shofwan Al Banna Choiruzzad. 2015. ASEAN di Persimpangan Sejarah. Politik Global, Demokrasi, dan Integrasi Ekonomi. Jakarta. Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia. 86-87.

⁵ Lidya Christin Sinaga. 2016. "Penilaian atas Pelaksanaan Demokrasi di ASEAN: Antara Defisit, Kemajuan, dan Status Quo" in Ratna Shofi Inayati. 2016. Demokrasi dan HAM di ASEAN. Jakarta. Mahara Publishing. 35.

interpretations. With the exception of Brunei Darussalam, all ASEAN member countries have carried out general elections, with various distortions, as happened recently in Myanmar. Under the pretext of election fraud, it became an entry point for the military regime to illegally take power. The promise to re-election was not even carried out until two years after the coup in 2023. Ten years after the research concluded, there are certain developments in some ASEAN member states which retard or even reverse the region's current progress on democracy. According to Freedom in the World 2021, there is no ASEAN country was categorized as “Free”.⁶

Challenges for Indonesia in Strengthening Democracy Agenda in ASEAN

During the handover of ASEAN chairmanship to Indonesia at the closing ceremony of the 40th and 41st Summits, 13 November 2022, President Joko Widodo explicitly mentioned the principles of humanity and democracy in his speech. Then, what is the relevance of the values of democracy on the agenda of the epicentrum of growth? President Joko Widodo in these summits emphasized boldly on how ASEAN should not be a proxy to any powers:

"ASEAN must become a peaceful region and anchor for global stability, consistently uphold international law, and not be a proxy to any powers. ASEAN must be a recognized region, uphold the values of humanity and democracy. ASEAN should not let current geopolitical dynamics turn into a new cold war in our region."⁷

Additionally, at the 32nd ASEAN Coordinating Council and ASEAN Foreign Minister Retreat in Jakarta, he also emphasized that ASEAN as the epicentrum of growth can be achieved only if it can maintain stability and peace in the region.⁸ It can be argued that those statements implicitly assert that by upholding the values of humanity and democracy, and international law, we can maintain the stability and peace in the region, and therefore, can achieve the epicenter of growth.

However, emphasizing the principles of democracy is not an easy matter for Indonesia at this time. There are at least two major challenges facing Indonesia, namely from within the country and from the surrounding environment.

First, Indonesia's current democracy is facing the problems of stagnation and regression.⁹ This condition, however, affected the credibility of Indonesia, some doubted by connecting Indonesian efforts to spread democracy in Southeast Asia to the quality of Indonesian democracy. This setback eventually took Indonesia's leadership hostage as a pioneer of democratic principles in the region. In addition, Indonesia's significant contribution to peacebuilding in the region is merely seen as symbolic rather than substantial. These things have finally led to the view that Indonesia's determination to address strategic issues in the region has decreased, including Indonesia's substantial initiatives in ASEAN. While this problem was also reflected in the foreign policy, Indonesia is trying to show that this condition does not necessarily weaken Indonesia's commitment to consistently uphold democracy as Indonesia's foreign policy tool. Therefore, its effort to uphold democracy in

⁶ Freedom House cited in Wongpun Amarinthewa. 17 June, 2021. “Encouraging ASEAN Community to Promote Peace in Myanmar”. Hukumonline International Webinar.

⁷ Sekretariat Presiden. 13 November 2022. “Presiden Joko Widodo Terima Keketuaan ASEAN 2023, Phnom Penh, 13 November 2022”. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4S6XyfPscmE&themeRefresh=1>

⁸ Detik News. 3 February 2023. “Jokowi Tegaskan ASEAN Tak Boleh Jadi Proxy Siapapun!”. <https://www.dw.com/id/jokowi-tegaskan-asean-tak-boleh-jadi-proxy-siapapun/a-64599088>

⁹ Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall. 2019. “Explaining Indonesia’s Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency, and Popular Opinion”. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41. 255-285; Thomas P. Power. 2018. “Jokowi’s Authoritarian Turn and Indonesia’s Democratic Decline.” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 58:3. 307-338.

Southeast Asia, including in Myanmar, is part of the implementation of ASEAN as the corner stone of Indonesia's foreign policy. The extent to which ASEAN remains the main pillar for Indonesia's foreign policy is something that cannot be denied, since the birth of this regional organization until now. However, for more than five decades, Indonesia's foreign policy towards ASEAN has not been in a vacuum. Fluctuations in Indonesia's foreign policy orientation towards ASEAN are unavoidable, especially in the last decade.

Secondly, at the same time, the environment around Indonesia is also changing rapidly. Each ASEAN country is experiencing domestic changes that have impacts on its commitment to ASEAN. As emphasized by Almuttaqi and Arif, the increasing emphasis on economic performance as a source of legitimacy is now becoming the major source of regime legitimacy in Southeast Asia.¹⁰ As a result, commitment to upholding democratic values and human rights has diminished, marked by the strengthened role of the military in several ASEAN member countries. The military coup that occurred in Myanmar in early 2021 is a signal of weakening ASEAN's pressure as a regional organization on its member countries to implement the points of principles that have been mutually agreed upon in the ASEAN Charter. Additionally, after the May 2014 coup, Thai-China relations has accelerated significantly, left the US-Thai old partnership left behind. Both China and Thailand focus on strengthening economic and military cooperation.¹¹ As the ASEAN region grows to become an economic as well as a political magnet among the great powers, making the challenges even more complex for Indonesia's leadership. Increasing tensions in the South China Sea in recent years have brought the rivalries of the great powers back into focus in the region.

However, ASEAN's weak influence as a regional organization, especially in the context of implementing democracy, is basically related to ASEAN's uncertainty about this principle. The purpose of the democratic principles referred to in the ASEAN Charter from the beginning was not to change the political system of its member countries or encourage its member countries to conform to liberal democratic values.¹² On the contrary, the concept of political development, which is the forerunner of the principles of ASEAN democracy, actually contains the first strategy in the form of "increasing understanding and appreciation of the political system, culture and history of member countries." This means that appreciation of the diversity of political, cultural and historical systems is seen as a limitation for the implementation of the principles of democracy itself. Luhulima gives the label "gated democracy" for the democratization style of ASEAN which is coloured by conditions where regional and international pressure to carry out political changes in ASEAN countries is hindered by the principles that exist within ASEAN itself.¹³

Therefore, the domestic political system of the member countries remains higher. Thus, the attitude of the Myanmar military junta which seems to ignore the Five Point Principles, a peace agreement signed by the Myanmar junta chief and nine ASEAN leaders in April 2021 to resolve Myanmar crisis, can be understood in this context. This is certainly a challenge that is not easy for Indonesia to maintain its commitment to upholding democracy in the region, including in its chairmanship this year.

¹⁰ Ibrahim Almuttaqi and M. Arif. 2016. "Regional Implications of Indonesia-China Ambivalent Relations". The Indonesian Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 2. 93.

¹¹ Ian Storey. December 2015. "Thailand's Post-Coup Relations with China and America: More Beijing, Less Washington". *Trends in Southeast Asia*. ISEAS.

¹² Lidya Christin Sinaga and Khanisa. 2019. "Pilar Politik dan Keamanan: Evaluasi dan Proyeksi Perkembangan Demokrasi dan HAM di ASEAN" in Lidya Christin Sinaga, Khanisa, Faudzan Farhana, Pandu Prayoga (eds.). 2019. 50 Tahun ASEAN: Dinamika dan Tantangan ke Depan. Jakarta. LIPI Press.

¹³ CPF Luhulima. 2016. "Demokrasi dan HAM di ASEAN: Antara Pemikiran, Pemahaman, dan Pengejawantahan" in Ratna Shofi Inayati (ed.). 2016. Demokrasi dan HAM di ASEAN. Jakarta. Mahara Publishing. 98.

Strengthening ASEAN through Commitment to Democracy

Since the inception of the ASEAN Charter which for the first time contained democracy and human rights, ASEAN has realized that it is not easy to implement these principles in the region. However, with the existence of the ASEAN Charter, this can be a signal that ASEAN as a region has adhered to universal values or principles. Therefore, it is no longer possible for an external actor to try to influence or interfere in a member state under the pretext of upholding democracy. Thus, all member countries must realize that the implementation of democracy and human rights is basically an important step to maintain stability and peace in the region.

For this reason, the prospect of implementing the democracy agenda in ASEAN during Indonesia's chairmanship this year lies in the extent to which ASEAN member countries are committed to building a political communication. It is an important element in building a shared understanding of democracy, and ultimately influencing each member to further strengthen the commitment to democracy. Therefore, the Myanmar case can no longer only be seen as a challenge but also a prospect for building political communication among fellow ASEAN members regarding their commitment to upholding democracy in the region. One of them is by sticking to the Five-point consensus as the only agreement among all ASEAN member countries to overcome the Myanmar crisis.

Internal and external environment for ASEAN have changed and the region has reached its peak of significance. For this reason, the biggest challenge today is to remain relevant amidst the rivalries of the big powers. The unity and centrality of ASEAN is the key that must be held in order to survive. In such a context, unity and centrality will only be realized by member countries that are willing to maintain their commitment to maintaining the credibility of the organization, including in upholding democracy and human rights in ASEAN. ■

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