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Building a Democracy Promotion Framework in Southeast Asia: Lessons from the ASEAN Case and Future Strategies

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The promotion of democracy is a challenging agenda in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). A close examination of the political systems of ASEAN member countries reveals the sensitivity of the topic of democracy in the region. As ASEAN is a key component of the Indo-Pacific regional order, the democratic development of ASEAN has important implications for the peace and stability of both the Indo-Pacific region and ASEAN member countries. Thus, building a regional democracy promotion framework in Southeast Asia serves as a foundation for the political and economic stability of the region. This paper examines the state of multilateral efforts to advance democracy in ASEAN. Utilizing insights from previous efforts, this paper proposes strategies for constructing a result-oriented framework for advancing democracy in Southeast Asia.

Efforts for Advancing Democracy in the ASEAN Framework and Their Limitations

The democracy deficit in ASEAN does not necessarily imply a lack of member countries' interest or desire to promote democracy. Political development has never been the organization's priority. At its inception, ASEAN was an intergovernmental organization designed to collectively respond to the spread of communism and resolve conflicts and animosities between major Southeast Asian countries. Most member countries were reluctant to accommodate the democratic agenda within the ASEAN framework; thus, the pursuit of a democracy agenda in ASEAN is a phenomenon that requires an explanation. Two factors can explain ASEAN's attempt to accommodate the political development agenda. Firstly, certain member countries were undergoing a democratic transition, and they sought for ASEAN to evolve into an intergovernmental organization that would uphold democratic norms and support their democratic transitions. Secondly, countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines recognized that political development is essential to peace, stability, and prosperity—goals of the ASEAN Security Community—and thus pursued the inclusion of a democracy agenda in drafting the ASEAN Security Community Plan of Action (ASCPA) (Sukma 2009).

The initial discussions concerning this agenda took place in drafting the 2004 ASCPA, following the formulation of the Bali Concord II of 2003. Under Indonesia's leadership and with the support of the Philippines, the ASEAN Security Community (ASC) adopted the goals of "peace, stability, democracy, and prosperity in the region." The Vientiane Action Programme (VAP) of 2004 also stressed that "ASEAN member countries shall not condone unconstitutional and undemocratic

changes in government” and called for the promotion of human rights within ASEAN. The VAP stresses that the ASC should be achieved by creating “a democratic, tolerant, participatory and transparent community in Southeast Asia” (ASEAN 2004). The emphasis on democracy was further accentuated in the ASEAN Charter, signed in 2007 and ratified in 2008. Though not binding, the ASEAN Charter obliges its members to strengthen democracy, enhance good governance and the rule of law, and promote and protect human rights and fundamental freedoms (ASEAN 2007). After the draft of the ASEAN Charter, significant advancements were witnessed in ASEAN’s efforts to promote human rights. The ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission of Human Rights (AICHR) was established in 2009 in line with the ASEAN Charter, and the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration was adopted in 2012.

Aside from collective ASEAN endeavors, certain ASEAN member countries have tried independently to promote democracy in the region. In addition to its leadership role in the ASEAN framework, the Indonesian government established the Bali Democracy Forum (BDF) in 2008 as the first regional forum to convene Asian government leaders at the ministerial level. The BDF invites non-democratic governments and aims to promote democracy by sharing democratic experiences and best practices without censuring other countries. The BDF, however, embraces the principle of non-interference and encourages gradual democratic transition rather than criticizing violations of democratic norms or pressuring the governments that commit them. This approach, coupled with the limited involvement of civil society actors, has led to criticisms that the BDF is unable to achieve meaningful outcomes. Government change is the most fundamental challenge to this government-sponsored platform. The 2025 meeting was canceled after the 2024 leadership transition in the nation.

New Strategies Based on the Lessons from Previous Efforts

The only tangible outcomes of ASEAN-centered efforts to promote democracy have been statements and declarations that support democratic norms and some organizational upgrades (The Kofi Annan Foundation and National Human Rights Commission of Malaysia 2017). This lack of significant progress can be attributed to two primary factors. First, the varying levels of democratic development and differences in the perceptions of security threats among member countries have resulted in differing prioritization of democracy. Second, and perhaps more fundamental, are ASEAN’s organizational characteristics: non-interference norms, consensus-based decision-making, and lack of enforcement mechanisms (Haacke 2003). For example, although the ASCPA explicitly stipulates that irregular changes of government should not be tolerated, ASEAN did not take action following the 2014 Thai military coup, nor did it impose sanctions following the 2021 Myanmar military coup that overthrew an elected government. AICHR, ASEAN’s organ for human rights, merely issued a statement and hosted workshops on human rights violations by the Myanmar military.

The most important lesson from ASEAN’s efforts in promoting democracy is that intergovernmental frameworks, such as ASEAN, may not be the optimal vehicles for democracy promotion in Southeast Asia. Instead, a more effective approach could be building a platform outside the ASEAN framework, circumventing the constraints imposed by ASEAN’s non-interference norms. The European Union (EU)’s experience in promoting democracy within the ASEAN framework offers a relevant lesson. Since the 2000s, the EU has been actively engaged in addressing the democracy agenda in its relations with ASEAN. However, when the EU-ASEAN relationship was

expanded through the Nuremberg Declaration on an EU-ASEAN Enhanced Partnership in 2007, democracy promotion was not discussed as a major agenda item. This was partly due to ASEAN's reluctance to incorporate a democracy agenda, which led the EU to advocate for democracy and human rights issues outside the ASEAN-EU framework (Wiessala 2004). The example of ASEAN-EU relations suggests that it is more productive to pursue a cooperative framework comprising select ASEAN countries that are willing to discuss democracy issues with outside actors.

Due to the ineffectiveness of government-led initiatives, the role of non-state actors in promoting democracy in Southeast Asia has received significant attention. Ichihara (2021) emphasizes the role of networks of civil society organizations in facilitating democracy cooperation mechanisms in Asia. Ichihara argues that the presence of civil society organizations was crucial in sustaining the momentum for regional democracy frameworks. Southeast Asia has strong civil society networks with a focus on promoting democracy and human rights. Civil society networks such as the ASEAN People's Forum provide a space for grassroots organizations, activists, and NGOs to engage with ASEAN on issues like human rights, democracy, and social justice. Parliamentary-related organizations also have a presence in democracy promotion in ASEAN. Notably, the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Assembly and the ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights (APHR) have played pivotal roles in promoting democracy and human rights across Southeast Asia. It is crucial to underscore the role of global foundations with a strong regional focus in Asia, which serve as a significant proponent of democracy in the region. These foundations provide financial support to existing civil society organizations and implement their own initiatives, including advocacy efforts. In contrast to the activities of civil society organizations, which are centered on raising awareness about the importance of democracy, good governance, and human rights, these foundations utilize their financial resources to support and implement result-oriented projects and initiatives. For example, the global foundation *Luminate* supports independent media to protect freedom of expression, counter disinformation and misinformation projects, and support investigative journalism. It also works to protect dissidents and supports global political organizations by providing resources such as training, networking, and funding.

The importance of civil society participation is closely related to the broader discourse on the institutional framework for promoting democracy at the regional level. A hybrid platform consisting of interested ASEAN member countries, non-ASEAN countries, and civil society organizations could be a viable option for effectively promoting democracy in the region. More specifically, the efficacy of government participation is maximized within a Track 1.5-type framework.¹ The participation, or at least strong support, of state actors is a prerequisite for an outcome-oriented regional framework. Since previous experience suggests that intergovernmental frameworks have more drawbacks than merits, a Track 1.5 regional platform, in which government officials participate in a private capacity and collaborate with non-state actors, may be a more effective alternative. In this type of framework, government officials can exchange views with fewer of the formal constraints that exist in an intergovernmental setting. The outcome of this type of interaction can feed new ideas and solutions to intergovernmental dialogue and negotiation.

The efficacy of this hybrid framework hinges upon the presence of a core country or countries that can assume an entrepreneurial leadership role, both between governments and civil society

¹ The distinction between Track 2 and Track 1.5 is elusive. By Track 1.5 type, I am referring to an unofficial level interaction but involves officials in a private capacity. For track 1.5 diplomacy, see Nan (2005).

organizations and, more importantly, among governments.² Canada's role in the establishment of the 1997 Ottawa Convention (Mine Ban Treaty) offers a useful reference. Without Canada's pivotal role, neither the drafting nor ratification of the Ottawa Convention would have been possible (Axworthy and Taylor 1998). In the context of ASEAN, this paper suggests that South Korea, Japan, and Australia collaborate closely with some ASEAN member countries that demonstrate a strong commitment to democracy and civil society, to build a regional partnership for advancing democracy in the region.

The final recommendation posits that the promotion of democracy in ASEAN could be enhanced through the involvement of non-regional actors. Where local impetus for advancing democracy is limited, the involvement of external entities could yield more favorable outcomes, if it is properly implemented and managed. This suggestion is somewhat controversial because, aside from Thailand, all other ASEAN member countries have colonial experiences, rendering them highly sensitive to the involvement of foreign governments in their domestic affairs. In light of these sensitivities, the principle of local ownership should be honored in the regional platform. As articulated by Yves Leterme (2017), the former Secretary-General of International IDEA (Institute of Democracy and Electoral Assistance), "Democracy cannot be exported or imported, only supported." Finally, the agenda in democracy promotion framework should be acceptable to all members of ASEAN, especially to non-democratic members. In this vein, less sensitive domains, such as capacity building (e.g., governance capacity), youth education, anti-corruption measures, and humanitarian relief should be prioritized in regional framework.

Conclusion

Based on the lessons of previous efforts to build democracy support infrastructure in ASEAN, this paper offers four suggestions for future strategies. First, future efforts to build a democracy promotion framework should involve democratic allies from other Asian countries, such as South Korea, Australia, and key European liberal democracies. Since intergovernmental-type institutions engaging all members of ASEAN have made democracy promotion limited due to the principle of non-interference, creating a democracy promotion platform between committed ASEAN member countries and their democratic allies beyond this sub-region would be worthwhile to pursue. Second, the role of civil society organizations in maintaining the momentum for fostering democracy is indispensable. It is also imperative to develop a way to leverage the role of funding organizations in building a regional democracy promotion framework. Third, while the contributions of civil society organizations are important, government participation remains the critical element in the establishment of any regional democracy support architecture. In this context, a hybrid institution in which civil society organizations work together with governments—mediated by a core country or countries—is a promising option. Finally, considering the strong resistance of some ASEAN member countries, the participation of external governments, such as those from the EU or Asian neighbors (South Korea, Japan, and Australia), should be encouraged. In this case, the principle of local ownership should be honored, and the pace and agenda for democracy promotion should be amenable to all participating actors. ■

² For the role of the entrepreneurial leadership in international institution building, see Young (1991).

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