

## **APA and Track 2½ Diplomacy:**

### **The Role of the ASEAN People's Assembly in Building an ASEAN Community**

Noel M. Morada

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The ASEAN People's Assembly (APA) is a Track 2 initiative of the ASEAN Institutes of Strategic and International Studies (ASEAN-ISIS) that was launched in 2000. The idea behind APA is the creation of a forum for debate, exchange of ideas, and generation of people-oriented policies on issues and problems facing the region among the various stakeholders and sectors. It also aims to foster dialogue and confidence building among policymakers, academe, think tanks and civil society groups in Southeast Asia on a range of traditional and non-traditional security issues, including human rights, human development and democracy. This chapter presents a background to APA, its outputs, as well as the challenges and opportunities for its institutionalization in the long term.

This chapter argues that the APA process no doubt contributes to community building in ASEAN. In particular, it serves as a venue for bringing together representatives from the various sectors in Tracks 1, 2 and 3 in the region. To some extent, it may be considered as a kind of Track 2½ diplomacy in the sense that it has created a network of think tanks, civil society advocates and policymakers that are committed to pushing the transformation of ASEAN into a more people-centred organization that is responsive to the voices, visions and values of peoples and communities in Southeast Asia.

#### **ASEAN People's Assembly: an Overview<sup>1</sup>**

APA was first convened in Batam, Indonesia, in 2000, and was organized by ASEAN-ISIS. To date, there have been five APA meetings, all held in Bali (2002) or Manila (2003, 2005 and 2006). Between 200 and 300 representatives from governments (in their

private capacities), academe, think tanks, civil society groups and people's organizations in Southeast Asia and beyond have participated in these meetings. The Institute for Strategic and Development Studies (ISDS), a member of ASEAN-ISIS, will again host the Sixth APA on 23–25 October 2007 in Manila as part of the 40th anniversary celebrations of ASEAN's foundation.

The convening of APA is based on the rationale that community building in ASEAN must include all sectors of society. ASEAN must be made relevant to the ordinary citizens of each of the member states—as it has become relevant to many members of the elite communities—if a genuine Southeast Asian Community is to be built. Such a community requires wider and deeper understanding about ASEAN among the citizens of the ten member states. Since its conceptualization, APA has responded to official views about the Southeast Asian Community as expressed in various ASEAN documents. A more concrete rationale for this community was expressed in the ASEAN Vision 2020 that seeks to build a community of caring societies, the component elements of which concern every citizen of ASEAN and target the unsatisfactory socio-economic conditions affecting its population at the grassroots level. Since October 2003, this vision has become concretized through the Bali Concord II in the ASEAN Community of three pillars: (i) an ASEAN Economic Community; (ii) an ASEAN Security Community; and (iii) an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community.

The idea of APA was first brought up in Track 1 and Track 2 discussions in the mid 1990s. Among official or Track 1 circles, the proposal for such a gathering of ASEAN peoples was brought up by the Thai Foreign Minister during the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Brunei Darussalam in 1995. ASEAN-ISIS, through ISIS Thailand, was requested subsequently to discuss the modality and procedure for organizing such a gathering and to make recommendations.

The discussion of the idea in Track 2 arenas was based on the conviction that widening and deepening ASEAN awareness is an indispensable cornerstone for the creation of an authentic ASEAN community. This requires the inclusion in community-building efforts of all sectors of ASEAN societies. Track 2 gatherings involve largely members of elite communities such as government, academe, business and the media. Rarely do representatives from the “peoples” sector—indigenous and marginalized

peoples, civic organizations, civil society organizations and peoples' organizations—get invited to these activities. Neither do they wish to be so involved in the early days of Track 2 processes. Instead, non-governmental organizations have organized their own activities in parallel, and often in opposition, to those organized by government.

ASEAN-ISIS has ruled out as premature the creation of a body similar to inter-parliamentary unions as a way to bring together the peoples of ASEAN. It produced a think piece on APA that was shared with the ASEAN SOM in its meeting in Yogyakarta in 1996. The idea of a people's assembly was realized only four years after its formulation. The first APA, held in Batam, Indonesia, in 2000, was an experiment that was regarded as a success though the concept of APA required further development in subsequent years.

The goals of the ASEAN People's Assembly are as follows:

- To promote greater awareness of an ASEAN community among the various sectors of ASEAN on a step-by-step basis
- To promote mutual understanding and tolerance for the diversity of culture, religion, ethnicity, social values, political structures and processes, and other elements of ASEAN's diversity among broader sectors of the ASEAN population
- To obtain insights and inputs on how to deal with socioeconomic problems affecting ASEAN societies from as many relevant sectors of ASEAN societies as possible
- To facilitate the bridging of gaps through various confidence-building measures, including participation in APA, between social and political sectors within and across ASEAN societies, especially Track 1 and Track 2, on a step-by-step basis
- To assist in the building of an ASEAN community of caring societies as sought by the ASEAN Vision 2020 and the Bali Concord II

Since its inception, APA has sought to increase the participation of peoples from the various sectors in the ASEAN member states in the activities of APA, including agenda setting and the organization of panels. It has also sought to bridge the gap between Track 1 and Track 3 by ensuring that there is a balanced participation from these two tracks in APA. The agenda includes items to inform APA participants about the

activities of Track 1 and views from Track 3, which were articulated during various plenary sessions of APA and concurrent panels to be heard directly by participants from Track 1.

APA has also succeeded in obtaining recognition from ASEAN leaders of its role in awareness-raising and community-building in ASEAN, specifically in the Vientiane Action Programme in November 2004 and through the Chairman's Report of APA 2006, which was presented during the Twelfth ASEAN Summit in January 2007. These are the outcomes of the various APA gatherings since 2000.

### **APA and ASEAN Community Building: Challenges and Prospects for Institutionalization**

This section provides a discussion of the author's observations of issues and concerns raised in the APA meetings that may have an impact on the long-term institutionalization of the APA process. In particular, it focuses on the challenges and prospects for the institutionalization of APA as a mechanism for consultation with peoples and communities within ASEAN.

There is no doubt that APA continues to be an important venue for the participation of representatives from Tracks 1, 2 and 3, where debates, the exchange of ideas and the generation of people-oriented policy recommendations have been important outputs over the last five meetings. A more people-oriented ASEAN has been the recurring theme of the past five APA meetings, underscoring the growing importance of greater responsiveness of ASEAN as a regional organization to the needs and concerns of people in the region. At the same time, many participants from civil society organizations have realized, after participating in APA meetings, that they need to continue engaging the governments of ASEAN in order to have their voices heard, instead of being anti-government or anti-ASEAN. The Working Group on Regional Human Rights Mechanisms, for example, has acknowledged that civil society groups must be patient with ASEAN in order to attain their goals and objectives of pushing for a regional human-rights agenda. This group has also participated in a number of ASEAN-ISIS Colloquium on Human Rights (AICOHR) meetings organized by ASEAN-ISIS even

before APA was conceived, which provided the opportunity to learn more about the “slow by slow” process of engaging with ASEAN.

A major principle observed in APA is inclusiveness, wherein individuals and groups from the various sectors and political/ideological persuasions are encouraged to participate and debate on issues that affect peoples and communities in the region. This principle has contributed to the growing legitimacy of APA as one of the major vehicles for community building in ASEAN, especially in the context of pushing for more people-to-people interaction in the region, as enunciated in the Vientiane Action Programme in 2004. Even so, the APA process has also been criticized by some civil society groups in the region for not being “representative” enough of Track 3. This criticism, however, springs from either a misconception of or a misplaced expectation about APA as a forum for articulating only the interests of civil society groups in the region.

Until the Fifth APA in Manila in December 2006, the opportunity for interface between APA and the ASEAN Summit was not available. In fact, there was much reluctance on the part of the official ASEAN circles—e.g., the ASEAN Foundation—to provide material support for APA meetings. The opportunity came only in January 2007, when the Chair of APA 2006 was given the opportunity to present the Chairman’s Report before the ASEAN leaders during the Twelfth Summit in Cebu, but only for 10 minutes. The presentation of the APA report was given due recognition in the ASEAN Summit Chairman’s Report, but the details of the former were not spelled out. This is in stark contrast to the detailed recommendations incorporated in the Eleventh ASEAN Summit Chairman’s Report of the First Civil Society Conference’s Chairman’s Report in 2005. It remains uncertain, however, whether the interface between APA and the ASEAN Summit will be repeated in the Thirteenth ASEAN Summit in Singapore. In the long term, this interface must be institutionalized for the sole reason that ASEAN’s community-building efforts cannot ignore inputs from people’s organizations and communities in the region.

Notwithstanding the uncertainties concerning the long-term institutionalization of the APA-ASEAN Summit interface, it must be pointed out that APA has provided greater opportunities for networking among civil society groups in the region. Through this, Track 1 officials have recognized the increasing importance of civil society networks,

especially in the context of drafting the ASEAN Charter. A number of consultations between civil society groups in the region, on the one hand, and the Eminent Persons Group on the ASEAN Charter and the High-Level Task Force that was created to draft the charter, on the other, have been conducted since 2006. ASEAN-ISIS and APA have been at the forefront of facilitating these consultations between Tracks 1 and 3 on the ASEAN Charter even as ASEAN-ISIS has also submitted memoranda as inputs to the EPG and HTLF. How much of the inputs from ASEAN-ISIS and the various civil society groups in the region will be incorporated into the ASEAN Charter draft remains to be seen.

Based on a set of recommendations and policy advocacies of the various civil society organizations that have participated in APA, a people-centred ASEAN is taken to mean that the member states of the association must take into primary consideration the welfare and development of marginalized sectors and ensure that the voices of the “little people” be heard. Where state and human security interests may clash, it is expected that ASEAN states would still be sensitive and responsive to human security concerns and respect human dignity and human rights.

The sustainability of the APA process is a major challenge facing ASEAN-ISIS as the organizer. To date, non-ASEAN funding organizations have substantially provided material support for the last five meetings of APA.<sup>2</sup> It was only in the Fifth APA in 2006 that the ASEAN Secretariat sponsored partially.<sup>3</sup> The good side of this is that the independence of APA is ensured. However, this may also be a liability given that funding supporters of APA may also reach their “fatigue” level in the future, especially if the APA-ASEAN Summit interface fails to be institutionalized over the long term. Thus, a healthy balance between ASEAN and non-ASEAN funding for the APA process must be maintained in the long run, in order to sustain the networking and agenda setting that APA provides for Track 3 and the building of confidence and trust between Tracks 1 and 3.

Will APA eventually have a life of its own in the long term, and will ASEAN-ISIS be willing to take a backseat in this regard? This remains an open-ended question. Nevertheless, it is clear that, for ASEAN-ISIS, its role in this project is to be its convenor, facilitator, fund-raiser, spokesperson and driving force, until APA takes on a life of its

own. There is no doubt that the idea behind APA is that it would be a regional mechanism, meant to create a people's gathering where they would meet on a regular basis, discuss issues they consider timely, important and relevant, seek solutions for them, and make recommendations to governments on these matters.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, to what extent would APA contribute to the institutionalization of ASEAN's decision-making processes, particularly in ensuring that it is part of the consultative mechanisms that may be enshrined in the ASEAN Charter? In the absence of an ASEAN Parliament at this time, APA could very well be the forum for the people's voices and concerns to be heard by ASEAN leaders and the official track. Moreover, the APA process could also help in establishing a monitoring mechanism within ASEAN that would ensure compliance by member states on various agreements that are aimed to protect the welfare of peoples and communities in the region, and in channelling their views and perspectives in the process of policymaking.

## **Conclusion**

The APA process no doubt contributes to community building in ASEAN. In particular, it serves as a venue for bringing together representatives from the various sectors in Tracks 1, 2 and 3 in the region. To some extent, it may be considered as a kind of Track 2½ diplomacy in the sense that it has created a network of think tanks, civil society advocates and policymakers that are committed to pushing the transformation of ASEAN into a more people-centred organization that is responsive to the voices, visions and values of peoples and communities in Southeast Asia. Although it has been recognized by ASEAN as an important mechanism for promoting people-to-people interaction, the sustainability of APA in the long run remains a big question given that, to date, ASEAN as an organization and its member states have not provided significant material support for its meetings. The interface between APA and the ASEAN Summit no doubt needs to be institutionalized so that the annual meetings of ASEAN leaders become not just about state-oriented issues and problems that affect the region but also about how they impact on the lives of the Southeast Asian peoples and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> This section of the paper is from the project proposal for the Sixth ASEAN People's Assembly, "ASEAN at 40: Realizing People's Expectations?" written by Dr. Carolina G. Hernandez and the author on 7 July

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2007. For proceedings and background papers from APA meetings since 2000, see (1) *An ASEAN of the People, By the People, For the People: Report of the First ASEAN People's Assembly, Batam, Indonesia, 24–26 November 2000* (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2000), (2) *Challenges Facing the ASEAN Peoples* (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2002), (3) *Towards Building an ASEAN Community of Caring Societies* (Manila: Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, Inc. for ASEAN ISIS, 2003), (4) *Towards A People-Centered Development in the ASEAN Community* (Manila: Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, Inc. for ASEAN ISIS, 2005), and (5) *The Role of the People in Building an ASEAN Community of Caring and Sharing Societies* (Manila: Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, Inc. for ASEAN ISIS, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The main supporters of APA are: The Open Society Institute (OSI) in New York; the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA); The Asia Foundation; the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS); the Sasakawa Peace Foundation; the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA); and some government institutions in the Philippines during the APA meetings held in Manila since 2003.

<sup>3</sup> The ASEAN Secretariat partially covered one meal function for the APA 2006 meeting.

<sup>4</sup> Mely Caballero-Anthony, “ASEAN ISIS and the ASEAN People’s Assembly: Paving a Multi-Track Approach in Regional Community Building”, in Hadi Soesastro, Carolina G. Hernandez, and Clara Joewono (eds.), *Twenty Two Years of ASEAN ISIS: Origin, Evolution and Challenges of Track Two Diplomacy* (Jakarta: CSIS for ASEAN ISIS, 2006), p. 64.