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To Admit or to Exclude Timor Leste? Implications for ASEAN integration

By Mushahid Ali

Synopsis

The 18th ASEAN Summit may consider Timor Leste's application to join ASEAN this year. Will its entry jeopardise economic integration and the formation of the ASEAN Community?

Commentary

THE 18th ASEAN Summit to be held in Jakarta on 7-8 May 2011 may take up the question of Timor Leste's bid to become the 11th member of the regional grouping. Timor Leste's formal application for membership, submitted to the Indonesian Chair on 4 March, is likely to be discussed when the ten foreign ministers meet as the ASEAN Coordination Council on 6 May. The Council's recommendation will be submitted to the Heads of Government who will decide on Timor Leste's entry by consensus. What is likely to be the outcome? What are the implications of Timor Leste's admission to or exclusion from ASEAN?

ASEAN's Lost Child

Timor Leste's representatives have made the case for its membership of ASEAN on three grounds: geographical location, aspirations of the people and political will and history. They say Timor Leste has a road map for ASEAN membership, including having an ASEAN National Secretariat and is capable and ready to participate fully in all its obligations as member. Timor Leste has participated in ASEAN Regional Forum meetings and invited ASEAN to send observers to monitor its 2012 general election.

The Timorese officials maintain that Timor Leste has achieved peace, social stability and unity, and will not be a burden on ASEAN. Timor Leste is of the region and has achieved consensus on the importance of ASEAN to Timor Leste. They declare that Timor Leste belongs to ASEAN. It was previously part of Indonesia; it is the lost child of ASEAN seeking to rejoin its family.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa has affirmed his support for Timor Leste's admission during Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN. "We think it's best to have them in now," he declared in an interview with the Straits Times. He agreed it would take special effort to get Timor Leste "economically up to speed" with the rest of the region, but pointed out that similar efforts had been made before with less developed members. He thought oil and gas-rich Timor Leste would eventually be a net contributor to ASEAN.

Dr Natalegawa argued that to isolate Timor Leste would be politically destabilising and economically unnatural.

“One cannot have a neighbourhood where everyone is happy and prosperous apart from the one you exclude,” he said. Cambodia and Thailand also support Timor Leste’s immediate entry to ASEAN.

ASEAN integration concerns

Other members, including Singapore, Vietnam and Malaysia, however, have serious concerns. While agreeing that Timor Leste qualifies on grounds of geography, they question its capability and readiness to assume the obligations of ASEAN membership. They cite the following negative factors: firstly, it has not made sufficient progress in developing its human resources; secondly, it has yet to achieve internal security and stability; thirdly, it lacks capability in institutional terms to fulfil the legal obligations of membership; and fourthly, it lacks capacity to fulfil the requirements of the ASEAN Community that will come into being on 2015.

These members believe Timor Leste will seek exemption from the obligations of the ASEAN Economic Community and thereby jeopardise ASEAN integration.

They doubt that Timor Leste will be able to attend the 1,000 meetings of ASEAN at different levels -- ministerial, official and expert (60% economic, 26% socio-cultural; 17% political-security). They question whether ASEAN is ready to admit Timor Leste before the ASEAN Community is realised in 2015. They stress the importance of the deadline, which, if missed, will seriously undermine ASEAN’s credibility and international standing.

Systematic Approach

Senior ASEAN officials suggest that Timor Leste’s case for membership be weighed in a systematic manner and on an agreed basis of its readiness for entry. ASEAN should have a programme to provide Timor Leste with the required assistance to prepare it for membership. That way ASEAN will be signalling its welcome for Timor Leste to be a future member.

For a start, the officials suggest, the ASEAN Secretariat should undertake a study of how and when Timor Leste can be admitted to ASEAN and what assistance it can be given. According to the ASEAN Secretariat, while there is no provision for associate membership, Timor Leste can be invited to be an Observer of ASEAN and attend some meetings; it can request to participate in ASEAN functional cooperation activities rightaway.

Given the divergent views within ASEAN, it is likely that the senior officials will recommend the subject be further considered by a working group of officials rather than forwarding the issue to the Heads of Government for a decision. While Timor Leste has Indonesia’s agreement in principle to become the eleventh member of ASEAN, it is best for Timor Leste’s own growth and ASEAN’s integration that the timing of its entry be determined on the basis of the readiness of both parties for its membership.

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