

## **Rudolfo Severino in search of an ASEAN Community**

by Dick Gupwell

Rudolfo Severino has recently completed a book entitled, *South-East Asia in Search of an ASEAN Community*. He notes that, in the forty years since its inception, ASEAN has not attained a level of integration comparable to that of the European Union, despite the fact that the Bangkok Declaration, of 8th August 1967, was signed only ten years after the Treaty of Rome. Nevertheless, the ASEAN partners have made some remarkable achievements, particularly in bringing peace and stability to their region.

Rudolfo Severino was the Secretary General of ASEAN between 1998 and 2002. He was also the Philippines' Ambassador in Malaysia, from 1989 to 1992. He reminds his readers of the situation pertaining in South-East Asia before 1967. Four of the five founding members had recently emerged from colonial rule. Indonesia objected to the establishment of Malaysia, created in 1963 by the federation of Malaya with Sarawak and North Borneo. The Philippines laid claim to North Borneo (Sabah). Singapore had separated from Malaysia in 1965. The Vietnam War was raging and China was being convulsed by the Cultural Revolution and railing against the non-communist regimes of South-East Asia.

The five founder members had widely differing international outlooks. Indonesia had hosted the 1955 Bandung Conference, which established the Non-Aligned Movement. Thailand and the Philippines had become members of the Western-oriented South-East Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO). Malaysia and Singapore were linked defensively to Britain.

Mr Severino has based his work on interviews with many of the actors, who determined the evolution of ASEAN over the past four decades. The main part of his book consists of an analysis of six main themes: the nature and origins of the "ASEAN Way"; the question of ASEAN membership; the issue of non-interference; ASEAN's role in regional security; integrating the ASEAN regional economy; and ASEAN's relations with the wider world. Each chapter pays scrupulous attention to both detail and chronology and yet is full of interesting anecdote.

For Mr Severino, the motivations of the founding member states were "their determination not to allow their disputes to develop into conflict", their resolve to work together and their "intention to avoid getting dragged into the quarrels of the great powers". It was, he says, "a vision of a region free from involvement in the quarrels of the strong".

The five founders eschewed legally binding commitments on the European model, due to mutual suspicions and their wide diversity. Their institutional arrangements consisted merely of an annual meeting of foreign ministers and a Standing Committee composed of the current presiding Foreign Minister and the ASEAN ambassadors accredited to that country. Indeed, ASEAN's first formal agreement came only in 1976, at the time of ASEAN's first Summit meeting in Bali. This was the Treaty of Amity and Co-operation (TAC), committing its members to respect for national

sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference in others' internal affairs, the rejection of the use or threat of force and the peaceful settlement of disputes.

Only after the 4th Summit, in 1992, did meetings of the ASEAN leaders become regular features. Moreover, the ASEAN Secretariat was set up in 1976, in Jakarta, merely as a channel for communications. It was expanded in 1983 and again in 1989 but it was only in 1992 that it was really strengthened, with the Secretary-General being attributed ministerial status and given a major role in the Standing Committee. ASEAN meetings decide matters by consensus and there is no scheme of majority voting.

As regards membership, Mr Severino stresses that the only real criterion is that a country must be part of South-East Asia. There are no political or ideological criteria. The admission of Brunei in 1984 was uncomplicated, after independence from Britain. Vietnam was admitted in 1995, Laos and Burma (Myanmar) followed in 1997 and Cambodia, after a short delay, in 1999. There remains the question of East Timor (independent in 2002), where a consensus in favour of admission is lacking.

ASEAN's principle of non-interference was enshrined in the 1967 Bangkok Declaration, in the 1971 Declaration on the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality and the 1976 TAC. He analyses how this principle has been successfully applied, citing the 2000 Chiangmai Initiative on financial monitoring (after the 1997-8 financial crisis), the 2002 ASEAN Agreement on Trans-boundary Haze Pollution, the comprehensive measures taken against SARS (2002-3) and the contributions made by ASEAN countries in restoring order in East Timor (1999). However, he concedes that peer pressure from other ASEAN members has achieved nothing to advance political reform in Myanmar. Indeed, the situation has "got worse".

ASEAN's decision to admit the four new members was impelled by politico-strategic concerns, to heal the divisions resulting from the long wars involving Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos and to ensure that no part of South-East Asia would be subjected to big-power rivalry. Myanmar's situation, sandwiched between India and China, was very significant but doubts were subsequently expressed about the timing.

Turning to regional security, he explains the success achieved by ASEAN's cohesion in reaching a settlement with Vietnam, after its occupation of Cambodia, and paving the way for ASEAN's subsequent enlargement. He stresses how ASEAN resolve was able to modify China's claims in the South China Sea. Tracing the origins of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), set up in 1994, he feels that the ARF could concentrate on non-traditional security problems, including terrorism. He also refers to the first meeting of ASEAN Defence Ministers, in May 2006.

Regarding the integration of ASEAN's regional economy, it was only in 1991 that consideration was given to setting up an ASEAN Free Trade Area. Progress towards AFTA has been patchy but substantial, mostly relating to tariff reduction, and intra-ASEAN trade has not expanded as hoped. In 2002, the ASEAN leaders agreed to move towards an ASEAN Economic Community, by 2020. He then looks at ASEAN's system of Dialogue Partners, of which the European Economic Community was the first in 1972. He analyses the evolution of the ASEAN+3 system (China, Japan and Korea) and the East Asia Summit, inaugurated in 2005.

Asking if the ASEAN Community is for real, Mr Severino looks at the three pillars of an ASEAN Community set out in 2003. For an Economic Community, he wonders if the short deadlines can be achieved within ASEAN's existing mechanisms. As regards achieving a Security Community, the guidelines have been set but it remains to be seen whether ASEAN Ministers will be able to work out the required implementing measures. For a Socio-Economic Community, this was "a hodge-podge of generalities" without specifics, timelines or focus.

In conclusion, he asks, "What kind of future for ASEAN?" There is praise for ASEAN for becoming a region "in which armed conflict is all but unthinkable" and for extending this principle beyond the region. He also praises what has been achieved by AFTA but stresses that ASEAN's current ability to make a reality of regional economic integration is "suspect" because of its total dependence on national decision-making and a weak sense of region. He calls for a further strengthening of the ASEAN Secretariat, a proper dispute-settlement system, an overhaul of the system of financing and a clearer statement of common values.

Rudolfo Severino's book is such a thorough and well-written analysis of the development of ASEAN and its current strengths and weaknesses that it will surely merit periodic updating. It is a most useful textbook for anyone wishing to study ASEAN. It would be helpful if a chronology of the main events were included among the annexes. Also, some analysis of the work of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Organisation could be added, as this is only mentioned in passing. ■

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