


Evolution of ASEAN Community Building: 50-Year Journey



Hun Sen

It is my great honour to be invited to contribute to write for the first volume of the commemorative publication *ASEAN@50: Retrospectives and Perspectives on the Making, Substance, Significance, and Future of ASEAN*.

Undoubtedly, this 50th commemorative anniversary marks one of the greatest milestones in the history of our ASEAN Community. Since its establishment in 1967, ASEAN has achieved a magnificent transformation of the region – now safer, wealthier, unified, and stronger than ever before.

ASEAN today has many friends, a much heavier weight internationally, and a strong voice that cannot be easily ignored. Over the years, ASEAN has been playing a role in the regional political and economic architecture by leading and driving various forms of dialogues, forums, and meetings to accommodate multiple dialogues with global and regional powers.

While maintaining regional peace and security, ASEAN also enhanced its image in the international community and strengthened its cohesion and unity.

Notwithstanding these important positive regional developments, the security and peace of the ASEAN region are now threatened not only by traditional security issues but also by much more unpredictable and disruptive threats such as terrorism, transnational crimes, human and drug trafficking, and global warming (increasing the frequency and severity of natural disasters), which are more difficult to address in both the short and medium terms. Nonetheless, the cooperation between the ASEAN Member States and their Dialogue Partners has been elevated in all areas – politically, economically, diplomatically, and socially. These growing interactions and cooperative arrangements have become a source of regional stability and security, creating an environment that will bring the region to a higher level of prosperity and well-being.

ASEAN Member States have significantly attained many economic achievements and improvements. From 2007 to 2015, the total gross domestic product (GDP) of ASEAN has doubled to US\$2.5 trillion while GDP per capita has increased over 80%, equivalent to US\$4,000. By the end of 2015, ASEAN had clearly become an economic community with remarkable influence; as a group, it constitutes the **third-largest economy in Asia**, and the **seventh-largest in the world** with the fourth-largest trading activities in the world after China, the United States, and Germany. ASEAN has also become an influential player in Asia and the world, widening markets regionally and globally and becoming an indispensable strategic partner of major countries and organisations in the world.

Currently, ASEAN is transforming itself into one of the world's most dynamic economic regions. ASEAN has a total population of over 622 million, with a rapidly growing middle class, which represents a huge market and production base in the world after China and India, while over 50% of ASEAN's population under the age of 30 constitutes a large and dynamic workforce. Regional growth has also contributed to a remarkable reduction of poverty. The poverty rate dropped from 40% in 1990 to about 15.6% in 2010, and about 13% in 2015, broadly corresponding to an increase of middle-class households from about 15% of the total population in 1990 to about 37% in 2010.

Over these years, ASEAN has constructed stronger institutional mechanisms, extended rules-based systems, and created cooperative frameworks that have created a more connected ASEAN. The adoption of the ASEAN Charter was a critical turning point for ASEAN to develop a concrete platform for collaboration, which is the stepping stone towards greater regionalism. ASEAN undeniably has achieved deeper integration in terms of institutional, physical, and people-to-people connectivity. In recent years, it has become apparent that ASEAN integration is more advanced and faster than other regions in Asia or other regions in the world. ASEAN has offered both economic and non-economic benefits to people in the region as a whole, simultaneously with improved political-security stability and socio-cultural harmonisation. All these have been achieved through the strong political commitment of the Leaders of ASEAN countries to come together for the good of the community, drawing on the synergies released by the framework for cooperation.

The Future of ASEAN and Cambodia

Looking ahead, ASEAN has adopted a vision embodying great ambition for transforming the regional economy by 2025 into a highly integrated and cohesive economy with four main characteristics: (i) a single market and production base, (ii) a highly competitive economic region, (iii) equitable economic development, and (iv) full integration into the global economy with all the Member States collectively identified as ASEAN.

In this fast-changing globalised world, while concentrating on the advancement of both subregional and regional architecture, we also need to keep our eyes open on rapidly changing global economic trends and technological developments in manufacturing, sometimes identified as **‘the Fourth Industrial Evolution,’** and changes in financial technologies in order to ensure that the enormous productive power of our region remains globally relevant. The current efforts of our region to establish a global production base or global factory will be confronted with another huge set of challenges in the future when this sort of evolution is realised. That challenge may be in the form of matching technology and training-driven productivity gains in other economies. We may need to reinvent our models of manufacturing, learning how to build ‘smart factories’

utilising new operating models and breakthroughs in technology. We also need to prepare ourselves ahead for the impact of these global megatrends.

Current global trends, however, present enormous opportunities towards both Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia in the coming decades. The shift in the centre of economic gravity towards East Asia is driven by the large rapidly growing economies in Asia. There are numerous factors in our favour: the new emerging middle class in Asian countries; a young and dynamic population; quick adoption of advances in information, communications, and computer technologies; a larger and better integrated market through free trade liberalisation; and vibrant connectivity in terms of soft and hard infrastructures through various initiatives, including the **One Belt and One Road** initiative and strong funding assurances. Our region has and will continue to benefit from its close proximity to the economies driving much of the world's growth. All these bode well for ASEAN and suggest further growth in influence in the global economy, trade, and geopolitics.

With robust growth, the countries of ASEAN have not only brought millions out of extreme poverty; this development has also created a large middle class whose expanding purchasing power is translated into higher demand for a wide range of consumer goods. ASEAN represents one of the most rapidly growing potential markets for many types of goods and services. However, for the region to achieve its full potential in trade and production and successfully adapt to the new technologies, we have a number of priority tasks that need to be completed. These include strengthening education and skills development, investing in physical infrastructure (particularly transport and communication), supporting research and development, and creating a favourable environment for inward foreign direct investment. These actions must be reinforced by further support for the process of regional integration. While meeting these modern challenges and seeking to create new opportunities, it is important that we do not lose sight of some essential things that drive our cooperation: **ASEAN Identity, ASEAN Way, ASEAN in Unity and Diversity.** These are the core unified goals which we must all strive to promote.

To thrive in the changing global marketplace, we must constantly adapt to new conditions and retain an open and flexible attitude to change. What sets us apart from many other groupings is a high level of trust and cooperation, and acceptance of new opportunities and a

willingness to review and reassess policies and strategies. Despite our successes, there is no room for complacency. Unless we move ahead with the Leaders, we will fall behind. One of the major concerns for Cambodia and other ASEAN Member States that share similar economic development status is the ‘**middle-income trap**’. Despite some increases in wages (that have been vital in giving people the incomes needed to satisfy basic needs), Cambodia’s overall competitiveness remains strong. Every effort is being made to make the investment environment even more attractive for investment (from ASEAN and beyond), and we expect to be able to sustain the strong growth rate we have enjoyed for the past 2 decades. Cambodia has embarked on new growth strategies through its **Industrial Development Policy (2015–2025)**, which reflects our ambitions to transform domestic economic structures and attract more skill-intensive industries as we gradually integrate into global and regional value chains, connecting with cross-border production networks. These policies have been combined with programmes to improve competitiveness through better economic governance and strengthened productivity growth.

As one among the eight champions of growth in the world increasingly recognised as a ‘New Emerging Tiger in Asia’, Cambodia stands on the edge of a new vista of growth and prosperity. Our identity as a member of ASEAN is a critical element of our future plans, as we draw on the economic strength of our association and the economic links and cooperation it has fostered. Our geographic position at the heart of ASEAN and the trading and investment opportunities that have opened up in recent years will help sustain our high rates of economic growth in the years ahead. As ASEAN moves from success to success, we recall with gratitude the courage and vision of the Leaders who initiated and guided this great endeavour. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their willingness to believe that our shared goals and principles would one day bind our countries together in an association that benefits us all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hun Sen was born on 5 August 1952 (officially on 4 April 1951) in Peam Koh Sna Commune, Stoeung Trang District of Kampong Cham Province. Upon completion of his local primary schooling, he moved to Phnom Penh in 1965 to continue his secondary education in the Lycée Indra Devi. He resided in Neakavoan Pagoda.

At the early age of 18, he had shown his nationalism as he joined the struggle movement that liberated the country on 17 April 1975. In 1977, he led a movement that liberated Cambodia and its people in 1979 from Pol Pot's genocidal regime.

His political career started in 1979 as Foreign Minister, then Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister (1981–1991), and finally Prime Minister (1985) until the present. His political career was marked by significant achievements, which laid the basis for the attainment of peace, national reconciliation, and the development of the country. He likewise proved to be an indispensable architect of the Paris Peace Agreements on Cambodia. Under his leadership, Cambodia became the 10th member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

For his great efforts and contributions to national reconciliation, peace, and the socio-economic development of Cambodia, he was conferred the title of Samdech by His Majesty the King Samdech Preah Norodom Sihanouk on 1 February 1994 and, on 12 October 2007, the title of Samdech Akka Moha Sena Padei Techo Hun Sen by His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni.

Hun Sen has a BA in politics from the Cambodian Tertiary Education, a PhD in political science from the National Political Academy in Hanoi (1991), and two honorary doctorates – a PhD in politics from the Southern California University for Professional Studies, USA (1995) and a PhD in law from Iowa Wesleyan College, USA (1996). He also received the following honorary degrees: Doctorate Degree in Political Science (honoris causa) in Foreign Relations from the University of Ramkhamhaeng, Thailand (2001); Doctorate Degree in Political Sciences from the University of Cambodia (2004); Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science from the Irish International University of the European Union (2004); Doctorate in Political Sciences from the Graduate School of Dankook University in the Republic of Korea (2006); Doctor of Philosophy in Education for Locality Development from the Council of the Bansomdejchaopraya Rajabhat University, Thailand (2006); Doctoral Degree in Education (honoris causa) from the Ministry of Education and Training of Viet Nam and the Hanoi National University of Education (2007); Doctor of Economics (honoris causa) from the Woosuk University, Republic of Korea (2009); Doctoral Degree in Political Science from the Graduate School Committee of Korea University (2009); Doctorate Decree of Literature from China's Guangxi University

for Nationalities (2015); and Doctorate in Transformational Leadership from the Limkokwing University of Creative Technology of Malaysia (2015).

He was admitted as a member of the Academy of Natural Sciences of the Russian Federation in 2002 and was recognised for his leadership in bringing peace, stability, and socio-economic development to Cambodia. In 2004, he was accepted and sworn in as a member of the Bar Association of Cambodia. In 2007, the Association of Certified Commercial Diplomats (ACCD), London, England, the first independent international Professional Body of Certified Diplomats, accorded him the rank, privileges, distinction, and status of 'Chartered Diplomat' with perpetual right to append the letters 'C Dipl' because of his success and fulfilment of ACCD's prescribed requirements through integrity, commitment, and outstanding achievements in diplomacy and peace building. The ACCD also awarded him the Honorary Fellowship of Companion of Commercial Diplomacy. In 2008, the Universidad Empresarial de Costa Rica conferred him the title Honorable Professor of Diplomatic and International Relations. In 2010, His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni of the Kingdom of Cambodia appointed him as a full member of the Royal Academy of Cambodia and, in 2011, as Honorary President of Academicians. In 2016, the European Tourism Academy awarded him the title of Academician Member of Honor.

He is also a recipient of numerous prestigious awards. He is the sixth person, and the first in South Asia, to be granted the World Peace Award by the World Peace Academy. His other awards are 'Lifting Up the Word with a Oneness-Heart' by Sri Chinmoy of the International Peace Center (2001); 'ASEAN Distinguished Honorary Fellow Member', the highest honorary title and the first one ever presented by the ASEAN Engineering Federation (2002); the U Thant Peace Award, the highest recognition granted by the Sri Chinmoy Centers International (2005); the Lao National Gold Medal, by Lao PDR President Choummaly Sayasone in recognition of Hun Sen's efforts in enhancing relations, creating good conditions, and developing economies, societies, and cultures between the Lao PDR and Cambodia (2008); Senator for Life and Ambassador-at-Large to the World Presidency, by the International Parliament for Safety and Peace (2008); Five (Gold) Star General of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces by His Majesty King Norodom Sihamoni of the Kingdom of Cambodia (2009); Peace and Development Award by the Union Media of ASEAN (2016); ASEAN Lifetime Achievement Award by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (2016); and IOC President's Trophy by the International Olympic Committee (2017).

He married Bun Rany on 5 January 1976. They have six children: (i) Hun Komsot (10 November 1976 – deceased), (ii) Hun Manet (20 October 1977), (iii) Hun Mana (15 September 1980), (iv) Hun Manit (17 October 1981), (v) Hun Mani (27 November 1982), and (vi) Hun Mali (30 December 1983).