



Thoughts on ASEAN's Success



Abdullah Ahmad Badawi

I join all the contributors in thanking the Government of the Philippines, the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), and the ASEAN@50 Team for this opportunity to share my ASEAN experience with you.

The highlight of my ASEAN experience must be 20 November 2007 when I, together with nine other ASEAN Leaders, signed the ASEAN Charter and witnessed the signing of the three ASEAN Community blueprints. I knew we were making history. But it was at that moment when I put pen to paper that the meaning of what we were accomplishing hit home. I was overwhelmed!

Three years earlier, in 2004, as Prime Minister of Malaysia, I proposed taking ASEAN to the next level by having an ASEAN Charter. Since its formation on 8 August 1967, ASEAN had operated with little formality.

Its secretariat was established only in 1975. In 2004, when I made the proposal, the region was recovering from global slowdown. The environment was increasingly challenging from both the economic and geopolitical fronts. As such, I felt that it was appropriate for ASEAN to streamline its organisational structure, legalise and strengthen its decision-making process, and review existing institutions such as the ASEAN Summit so that the grouping would be in a better position to address the emerging global issues. In the true spirit of ASEAN consensus, the other Leaders agreed with me and my proposal became a reality.

The ASEAN Charter is indeed a key milestone in our ASEAN journey. It transformed ASEAN from a loosely organised regional body to a rules-governed international organisation. But we must not forget ASEAN is a child of its times and that its history mirrors global strategic developments.

In 1967, when ASEAN was formed, Southeast Asia was deeply divided in theory and in practice because our countries were then caught in the middle of the Cold War. We sided with either of two antagonistic blocs that espoused two different ideologies. The decision to band together was driven by the need to ensure peace and security in the region. This commitment was manifested in the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia at its first summit in 1976. For surely, we could not have focused on economic growth if we were not assured of peace and security in the region.

We have taken these decisions because we are committed to the enhancement of ASEAN's competitiveness. We need to ensure the ASEAN region remains attractive to investors. This is particularly necessary in view of the pressure of increasing competition, regionally and globally. Indeed, ASEAN has been making good progress in building the necessary foundation for a higher level of economic integration. ASEAN's best option is to continue building upon this foundation.

ASEAN Member States will need to address the balance between domestic and regional interests to achieve the broader goal of the region becoming a single integrated, seamless market, and serve as an international production base. Strengthening the economic base will facilitate the establishment of a truly ASEAN Economic Community.

This in turn will provide a good foundation for ushering into being the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community and the ASEAN Political-Security Community.

As I reflect on ASEAN's achievements, I have to say that in the face of challenges ASEAN has been steadfast in our integration endeavour. Key to our success has been the observance of fundamental values and principles of mutual respect for national sovereignty, equality, and territorial integrity, as well as non-interference, peaceful settlement of disputes, renunciation of the threat or use of force, effective regional cooperation, and decision-making by consensus.

I know that many outside the region may find it difficult to comprehend the utility of the values and principles I have just outlined. But I would like to maintain that it is because of these shared values and principles that ASEAN has remained intact, united, relevant to the region, and is still going strong since its establishment in 1967. It has kept the peace between its members, enabling regional cooperation to flourish and contribute to the economic and social well-being of the people.

Further, in our own 'ASEAN Way', we recognise our cultural diversity: that we are at different levels of economic, social, and political development. So, our step-by-step approach, which is moving at a pace comfortable to all, has served us well.

Going forward, we have to be even more alert and remind ourselves to nurture ASEAN and keep it central to the lives of the people in Southeast Asia. Global developments are testing ASEAN's unity and cohesion. We must be steadfast in keeping our solidarity and remain focused on achieving our common mission of fostering greater regional integration.

In this context, I am pleased that the Philippines has chosen for its theme this year 'Partnering for Change, Engaging the World'. More than ever today, as we witness the rise of anti-globalisation and inward-looking policies by some major economies, ASEAN must work harder to engage our partners and keep our markets open.

Also, as we focus on regional peace, security, and cooperation, we must play a bigger role in addressing pressing international issues in order to stake our relevance. In the wake of troubles elsewhere in the world, we must jealously

guard and preserve the peace and stability we have in ASEAN and contribute to the fight against international terrorism. The strides we made in engaging our partners through the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation should encourage us to take a leadership role in ensuring security in our neighbourhood.

ASEAN has achieved much in the past 5 decades. Let us put our collective shoulder to the grind and continue our community building. For surely it is one of the best ways of building peace and keeping the peace. The measure of our success will be in our ability to not only deepen our bonds but also to leverage on our partnerships to further economic integration and prosperity for our peoples. I am confident we will be able to do this.

God bless ASEAN with peace and prosperity in the years ahead!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's career as a civil servant, political leader, diplomat, and statesman has spanned 45 years. He was born in 1939 into a prominent religious family in the northern state of Penang. Graduating in Islamic studies from the University of Malaya, he started in the Malaysian civil service in 1964. He left the civil service as Deputy Secretary General of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports to become a politician in 1978, and rose to become Prime Minister of Malaysia 25 years later, in October 2003.

He held various positions in government, including Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Minister of Education, Minister of Defence, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Minister of Home Affairs, and Minister of Finance. Excelling in diplomacy and international relations, as Prime Minister, he sought to improve bilateral and multilateral cooperation, actively leading (among others) the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) when Malaysia assumed the chair of these international organisations.

As Prime Minister, he introduced the concept of Islam Hadhari to guide development efforts in Malaysia and the wider Islamic world. This move towards progressive Islamic civilisation seeks to make Muslims understand that progress

is enjoined by Islam. It is an approach that is compatible with modernity and yet firmly rooted in the noble values and injunctions of Islam. Islam Hadhari espouses 10 fundamental principles which Muslims and non-Muslims alike accept.

He focused on human capital development as a key pillar of his administration. This went beyond merely strengthening lower and higher education in Malaysia, to enhancing mindsets and infusing ethical, moral, and religious values. Science and technology was further promoted, while innovation and creativity was pushed to the fore.

As OIC Chair, he waged a war against poverty and the lack of knowledge and development in the Muslim world. Besides emphasising the enhancement of education in OIC countries, Malaysia sought to share its experience in national economy development. It initiated a series of self-help projects involving OIC members and the Islamic Development Bank to increase capacities in poor OIC member countries. The immediate purpose was to generate income and provide employment, while the longer-term intention was to assist the OIC countries upgrade their governance and development efforts.

He also sought to provide an economic face to the OIC in a bid to enhance trade, business, and investment linkages between member countries. The World Islamic Economic Forum (WIEF), of which he is the founder patron, continues to be an important gathering of government and business leaders from the Muslim world and beyond. International Halal fora and trade expositions, initiated by Malaysia, are now held regularly globally to advance Halal industries, for the benefit of the larger Ummah.

He married the late Endon Dato' Mahmood in 1965 and, after 40 years of marriage, lost her on 20 October 2005 after a prolonged battle with cancer. They have two children and seven grandchildren. He married Jeanne Abdullah on 9 June 2007.

He stepped down as Prime Minister on 3 April 2009. He remains committed to pursuing development, promoting progressive Islam, and enhancing understanding between the Muslim and Western worlds. He is Chair of the Malaysian Institute of Islamic Understanding (IKIM), and Patron of the International Institute of Advanced Islamic Studies in Kuala Lumpur which he established in 2009. He holds several government advisory roles, including in Malaysia's regional growth corridors and Malaysia Airlines. Internationally, he is the member of the InterAction Council, board member of Boao Forum for Asia and World Muslims Foundation, and Chair of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group.