



YOUTH PEACE ESSAY

ASEAN-IPR



Youths: the Future Hope of ASEAN Peacekeepers

by Silvi Angelia May Purba

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The Association of Southeast Asian Nation (ASEAN) member-states' history as the once colonized is still fresh in our memory. Less than a century ago, almost all ASEAN countries have been colonized, freed, and later, struggled to defend itself from colonizers – even fighting battles that are not supposed to be ours, like the Vietnam War and the Cold War. The wars were not that far away; some of us still have living grandparents who can recite their war experiences. Perhaps all ASEAN citizens can agree that we, as dignified human beings, do not deserve those painful treatments. And for any sides, war is futile.

Yet the ASEAN was able detach itself from war and become one of the first global protectors of peace and rights. In 1961, several countries from the region joined the Association of Southeast Asia. Six years later, the same countries established its regional organization, the ASEAN. Five decades later, the ASEAN created the Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights as an independent body and drafted the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration (AHRD). Since the end of World War II, the ASEAN repeatedly declared its devotion as protector of amity, in strike of the opposing colonizing coalitions.

The ASEAN, however, is now under scrutiny due to its wilted devotion to protect world peace. Although the ASEAN has numerous charters to protect peace and citizens' rights, we are oftentimes criticized as a “toothless” tiger when it comes to addressing real-time peace violations. The ASEAN has repeatedly turned a blind eye to human rights violations, under the justification of its non-interference policy (Hasan & Yudarsan, 2017). These include the extra-judicial killings under the drug war in the Philippines, the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, the killings of Papuans and Timor-Leste civilians in Indonesia, and the neglect of refugees in Indonesia and Malaysia. There are many others issues that are impossible to mention one by one. These problems are not simple clashes of principles nor disagreements; these are real problems with armed conflicts, where thousands of civilians died without any opportunity to flee or plea for amnesty. So how did a region that hates war so much become a bloody battlefield of the 21st century?

We can trace back this problem to the colonization era. The effort to conquer new lands was historically embedded with racism as a tool of control. By clearly defining natives as “savages,” it gives colonizing countries legal justification to



take control and civilizing the new people. (Badera, 2020). In reality, the natives are more used for exploitation rather than civilizing. Labelling certain group of people with derogatory remarks and refusing to acknowledge them as co-equals are the root causes of every human rights violation, including wars. In retrospect of post-World War II, countries under the United Nations acknowledged these wrong practices and decided to recognize equal human rights for all under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This charter successfully discouraged ex-colonizer nations from occupying other countries. It failed, however, to address the psychological boomerang of those who once colonized: the problem of colonial mentality.

Colonial mentality can be defined as an effort to detach oneself from their inherent identity in order to be associated more with the higher class of their past colonizers. Currently, the United States is the most famous country with active racism issues. But the ASEAN could not detach itself from the claim. Although less reported, the ASEAN is also home to various passive-aggressive racism issues in the world. Arguably, the ASEAN's tendency for racism also stemmed from centuries of colonialism. For decades, we have been degraded and humiliated, and now when we are free, we are inclined to do the same discrimination to others from "lesser classes," like individuals from lower socioeconomic standing or those from ethnic minorities. This phenomenon is a form of immature coping mechanism called displacement (Sadock, Sadock, & Ruiz, 2015). Decades of repressed anger further fuelled this misplaced revenge. And with our identity as a multicultural region, it is always easy to find someone to discriminate.

Another side of colonial mentality that makes this issue become even more complicated is the wobbly structure of new government. After independence, ASEAN countries were pressured to create new government systems, often with threats from other countries. An authoritarian approach is seen as an easier means to control public disturbance while creating a new political system, but it is also very easy to manipulate under irresponsible leaders. Since the independence of ASEAN countries, we have encountered numerous instances of leaders manipulating their power to advance their personal interests, one of which is the ongoing coup d'état in Myanmar.

But even after a developed understanding of human rights equality and countless research to assess peacekeeping in ASEAN, these issues persist. The most troublesome one is, of course, our reluctant tendency to stay away from other ASEAN member-states' issues. In the past, European colonizers are very keen to have defined land borders to protect their colonized territories from conflicts and monopoly (Jie, Tallara, Bach, Demerdzhiev, & Bach, n.d.), which have repeating



patterns with current ASEAN regional dynamics. The 7th principle of the AHRD does define the non-interference policy, while also mentioning that the realizations are limited with the context of background in each member-state in previous clauses (ASEAN, 2012). This principle, however, does not validate human rights violations that already occur in the ASEAN. The linguistic structure of declarations usually follows the rule of importance, with the statement written before bearing more power than the other points that follow. Thus, in that context, the excuse of political background as an arsenal of non-interference in the 7th clause bear no greater power than the protected rights stated in the 1st until 6th points of the AHRD. All the rights safeguarded under the AHRD should be protected beyond excuses, and not be weighed down by cost-analysis.

The complicated relationship between the ASEAN's civilian, government, and regional colonial mentality resulted in the negligence on human rights violations. So, we, as a collective entity, have committed violence towards the rights and peace of ASEAN citizens. Now, the questions arise: Are our excuses to human rights violations in the ASEAN acceptable, or is it just an internal justification to avoid confrontations?

What differentiates youth from the older generation is our ambition for change. We are driven by criticisms from the previous generations and we strive to create solutions instead. But above all, we are unattached from political or economic interests, making us more neutral and freer from biases. Currently, some ASEAN member-states still do not have bodies to channel youth interests in policymaking, but it does not mean we should be discouraged from doing so. Sooner or later, we will be the ones to pass policies in our respective countries, so be prepared. We must keep in mind our understanding of human rights equality and peace. We have more time and knowledge to analyse all aspects of the human rights movement, and we must put it to good use. After that, in whichever study you want to pursue, put your mind into it and stand for public interest. Every sector is crucial in bringing about a holistic rights equality and peace regulations, with no sectors more superior than other. With these two simple steps, we can make small changes in our community, and sooner or later help reshape our regional interests as peace defenders.

The year 2022 is the 10th year anniversary of the AHRD. A decade is a long time that passes, but many more awaits in the future. It's not too late for us as an entity to re-evaluate our stance and determination to fulfil the pledge we took under the AHRD. The time is now to start an equality revolution, to remake the ASEAN as not only the protector of amity, but also the protector of human rights.



And the beginning of rebuilding the ASEAN as a peace defender starts with the youth.

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