

COMMENTARY

Asean's attitude toward civil society - "the interface has become a farcical and meaningless exercise"

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The relationship between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or Asean and civil society organizations (CSOs) has been a thorny one throughout 11 years of engagement. This is despite the fact that Asean has explicitly recognized the role that CSOs can play in the region. The main forum for CSO engagement with Asean is the Asean Civil Society Conference/Asean Peoples' Forum (ACSC/APF).

In 2005, "Asean announced that it would recognize ACSC as the 'formal platform' for CSOs, to be convened in conjunction with the annual leaders' summits." Through its three blueprints for 2025, Asean acknowledges the role of CSOs with respect to the association's three pillars — the economic community, the sociocultural community, and the political-security community. But Asean's recognition of CSOs is inconsistent given that in the 2007 Asean Charter and in its main 2025 blueprint, there is no mention of CSOs at all.

A fundamental problem lies in how the body officially defines CSOs. The 2012 "Asean Guidelines on Accreditation for Civil Society Organization" defines a CSO as: "a non-profit organisation of Asean entities, natural or juridical, that promotes, strengthens and helps realise the aims and objectives of the Asean Community and its three Pillars ..."

Similarly, the Asean Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights defines a CSO as: "the association of persons ... which are organized voluntarily to promote, strengthen and help realise the aims and objectives of Asean activities and cooperation in the promotion and protection of human rights."

This definition is, obviously, self-serving and runs counter to internationally accepted definitions of CSOs as independent and autonomous players with their own vision and goals that may not necessarily coincide with state policies. The UN Development Program defines CSOs as "all non-market and non-state organizations outside of the family in which people organize themselves to pursue shared interests in the public domain. CSOs, by their very nature, are independent of direct government control and management."

As the scholar Helen Nesadurai observed: "Asean's preference appears to be for a civil society that will help it achieve the already established goals and projects of Asean's governing elite rather than a civil society that will — through genuine, two-way deliberations — help Asean set these goals and agendas in the first place."

In other words, CSOs are expected to adhere to Asean's preset agenda. Not surprisingly, there has hardly been any progress in making Asean recognize civil society's legitimate concerns let alone

seriously implement the range of proposals presented at the annual Asean summits. The attitude shown by Asean in its dealings with civil society groups can best be described as tokenism and often marked by improper government interventions that violate the independence and autonomy of CSOs.

In the interface between CSOs and the heads of state that takes place at the end of their annual summits, Asean governments insist on approving the names of CSO representatives or designating their own state-supported CSOs to sit in the gathering. Furthermore, a mere 15-30 minutes are allocated for the meeting. Because of these indecorous impositions, the interface has become a farcical and meaningless exercise.

In assuming the chairship of Asean 2017 on the occasion of the group's 50th year, the Philippine government must also take the lead in righting the wrongs done to CSOs by the Asean process and usher in a new mode of Asean-CSO relations based on mutual respect, popular participation, inclusiveness, and democratic governance. Unless this new mode is put in place, Asean will continue to be perceived as catering only to the narrow interests of political and economic elites in the realms of the state and market and divorced from the peoples' goals and aspirations.

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- * Philippine Daily Inquirer / 12:18 AM March 17, 2017:
<https://opinion.inquirer.net/102490/aseans-attitude-toward-civil-society>
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New vision for CSO engagement with Asean

The Philippines hosts the Association of Southeast Asian Nations this year, as the latter marks the 50th year of its founding. Civil society organizations (CSO) across the region have long been challenging Asean to address issues that affect Southeast Asian peoples. The more prominent concerns are: 1) lack of popular participation in Asean decision-making; 2) rising inequalities between and among member-countries; 3) weakening democracies and rise of authoritarian governance; 4) human rights deficits and absence of sanctions against rogue regimes; 5) dominance of an elite-centered development strategy and failure to attain inclusive growth; 6) lack of a regional identity and unity; 7) weak social protection; and 8) continuing gender inequalities.

The main forum for CSO engagement with Asean is the Asean Civil Society Conference/Asean Peoples' Forum (ACSC/APF). Formed in 2005, the ACSC/APF has focused on organizing national consultations, dialogues with government counterparts, regional consultative meetings, crafting the ACSC/APF annual statement, holding a parallel conference, mass mobilizations, and an interface with Asean leaders.

The results have been disappointing for CSOs. An internal ACSC/APF review (2005-2015) concluded that "individual Asean member countries have consistently resisted and vacillated with regards civil society participation and engagement." The ACSC/APF 2016 statement bemoaned "Asean's prevailing silence and lack of attention and response to the observations and recommendations raised in all ... ACSC/APF Statements."

Given the frustrating outcomes of years of engagement with Asean, what is needed now is a new vision by CSOs for 2017 and beyond. ACSC/APF must now think and act outside the Asean box and

initiate a process of establishing a regional integration model that is based on people-to-people interactions rather than state-to-state or market-oriented interactions.

Southeast Asian peoples have long been engaged in alternative and nonmainstream practices that encompass economic, political, social, and cultural aspects. At the economic level, examples are: people-to-people trade through cooperatives; reviving local markets by building forward and backward linkages; social enterprises; sustainable food production systems, organic farming, agro-ecology, biodiversity, zero-waste production, community-based renewable energy systems; and vernacular architecture.

On the political front, the new vision would entail expanding CSO networks on environmental issues, human rights, and peace and human security. At the local level, this means looking into alternative modes of governance that are participatory and popularly based. In the social aspect, self-help groups have long existed and local networks have coordinated their social protection activities. On the cultural aspect, artists and performers engage in exchange programs in order to share the richness of emancipatory Southeast Asian cultures.

The ACSC/APF strategy for the new vision is to build on these existing alternative practices and, through its network's members, work for a new paradigm of regional integration from below. While the normal modes of engagement with governments are to continue, this will no longer be the main focus of ACSC/APF's work.

The real challenge facing ACSC/APF today lies from outside and beyond the Asean process. While Asean remains locked in a market-centered and state-supported process, civil society must be tightly interconnected with grassroots initiatives and the creative practices of real peoples struggling to carve a more dignified life for their families and communities and for the future. ACSC/APF has to take up this challenge or continue to be mired in the old ways that have proven ineffectual and counterproductive.

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