

COMMENTARY

50th year after: Asean ignores civil society... again

Friday 20 July 2018, by [TADEM Eduardo C.](#) (Date first published: 4 December 2017).

Malacañang's spokesperson has termed Asean's commemoration of its 50th year a "tremendous success," but based it mainly on the absence of any "untoward incident" rather than on the concrete and clear outcomes. There were the usual platitudes of the Asean 2017 chair being finally recognized "not just as President of the Philippines [and] a leader of Southeast Asia but a recognized leader in the international community." But then the same could be said of the 2016 host, the unrecognizable Lao prime minister, or, in 2015, the scandal-plagued Malaysian prime minister. So, judging Asean 2017 by the fact that "no untoward incident" took place is setting the bar rather low.

A more substantial view is needed to evaluate Asean's performance, and it is in this measure that the regional alliance has been found wanting. For one, the agenda of creating a single market remains a pipe dream with intra-Asean trade stagnating at an average below 25 percent since 1995. Inequalities between and within countries are increasing. Singapore's per capita GDP is 50 times higher than those of Cambodia and Myanmar and 30 times that of Laos. The average Gini index for Asean is close to 40, indicating high levels of intracountry inequalities. The official poverty rate may have improved at 14 percent or 90 million people, but is understated as it uses the old World Bank global poverty line of \$1.25 rather than the 2015 updated one of \$1.90. Over 50 percent of Asean's workforce suffer from poverty-level wages, with women in a more vulnerable position. At 3 percent, Asean governments' spending on social protection is only half the minimum recommended by the International Labor Organization.

The rise of bilateral and multilateral trade agreements leads to greater concentration of wealth and power in the hands of giant corporations. Asean also ignores the wholesale displacement of peoples from their lands by development and corporate projects, thus spurring labor migration. In the meantime, the majority of migrant workers are stuck in low-skilled and precarious jobs.

Asean leaders have allowed the region to be a flashpoint for great power rivalries threatening peace and security while opening up their economies to plunder of their natural and human resources. At the same time, universal canons of human rights are ignored and violations by member-states routinely tolerated. Even as the Asean Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights remains toothless and impotent, governments are enacting laws and issuing decrees that further constrict civil society movements and peoples' initiatives.

The Asean Civil Society Conference/ Asean Peoples' Forum (ACSC/APF), the region's major network of peoples' organizations, social movements, and nongovernmental organizations, has been engaging Asean on these issues and concerns since 2005. It has taken Asean to task for ignoring the plight of the region's marginalized and excluded sectors. These include the workers, urban poor, small farmers, fishers, women, indigenous peoples, LGBTI persons, youth and students, older persons, those with disabilities, and migrant workers.

In a 13-page statement issued at the close of the 31st Asean Summit last month, the ACSC/APF

scored Asean's "dominant development narrative that has bred extreme inequalities, extensive human rights violations, situations of conflict and violence, and wanton exploitation of natural resources that are overwhelming the region's ecosystems."

Through the years, "issues and concerns raised by civil society ... continue to be ignored." This is reflected in the "lack of meaningful dialogue, absence of opportunities for interface with officials, and inaction over the draft terms of reference on government-nongovernment relations." More ominous, the ACSC/APF considers these signs as "evidence [of] the shrinking space for civil society to effectively shape the agenda and policies of Asean and their respective governments."

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P.S.

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