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### LEARNING FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION

By

Apichai Sunchindah

A little over a decade ago, I wrote a piece in the *Jakarta Post* on "Mid-life reflections on Asean and the EU". My basic contention was that the activities of both regional organisations, while created with noble aims and good intentions, were primarily driven by elites and bureaucrats and had received fairly little input from, and were thus quite dissociated from, the local communities.

As evident in the recent Brexit vote in Britain, the ones who voted to leave were mainly those who were dissatisfied with the EU and the perceived loss of British sovereignty and identity, compounded by the influx of immigrants. So it was basically a protest vote against the establishment and its associated machinery. Can Asean also experience such dissonance, if not now, then perhaps further down the road as it becomes a full-fledged community?

Asean has by no means reached the EU's level of integration nor does it face the degree of challenges that the latter has encountered especially in recent years where its various policies and institutions have been severely tested. It would therefore be opportune for Asean to learn some valuable lessons from the European experience as it also moves towards a more integrated community and to hopefully address the critical issues beforehand.

Ten years ago, both Asean and the EU were in a much firmer position as proponents of regionalism than they are today. Lately, both Asean as well as the EU's solidarity has been seriously challenged, notably by the recent developments in the South China Sea issue with China in the former and by Russia's intervention in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine

in the latter where discord among members of the respective groupings became evident.

Moreover, in the EU's case, how it dealt with the financial crisis since 2008 and the more recent migration/refugee issues as well as terrorism threats occurring within its boundaries were cited by skeptics as failures of the regional organisation in effectively tackling the problems. While Asean fared relatively better during the past decade in comparison, it nevertheless had its share of such challenges.

As the recent Brexit referendum clearly showed, any regional integration and community-building exercise has its pluses and minuses. There will invariably be winners and losers in the process. The key challenge is how to handle the trade-offs and especially how well the benefits and costs are shared in an acceptable manner. Otherwise, discontent is bound to rise which could eventually prove detrimental to the entire endeavour.

Perceptions of growing socio-economic disparities due to loss of income and employment opportunities, coupled with inflows of immigrants and acts of terrorism resulted in fear and anxiety gripping a significant portion of the British populace. This then played into the hands of demagogue politicians who painted a relatively negative and unbalanced picture of European integration.

While Asean is not facing as severe a challenge to regional cohesion as what the EU is experiencing right now, it nonetheless shares some similar fault lines.

Two surveys of university students in Asean countries conducted within the past decade showed that among the current "crème de la crème" of the region, "Singapore is persistently ambivalent towards Asean and this attitude is emerging in Thailand". This could be a potential worrying sign when the future "movers and shakers" in the region, especially from two key founding member countries of Asean, become less enthusiastic about the regional organisation. The survey also indicated that this student group tends to view Asean regionalism and cooperation through a "national lens" and thus "Asean must identify areas where regional actions could resonate nationally".

Numerous surveys have also been conducted within the Asean region which generally showed that the person on the street has relatively little knowledge, if at all, about Asean and what it does. While this may not be too critical, if it persists it could ultimately undermine

further region-wide integration later on as the recent Brexit vote has clearly demonstrated.

Asean can draw several lessons from the recent European experiences. First, it is crucial to obtain a fairly accurate sense of the sentiments of people at the grassroots level. Second, swift and effective actions must be taken to address any legitimate concerns and unwarranted worries in order to provide assurance to citizens that efforts are being made to narrow any actual disparities and that development would be equitable and inclusive by "leaving no one behind". Third, a fair and balanced presentation of the actual pros and cons of regional integration should be encouraged. Fourth, more intensified efforts ought to be made to make Asean activities more visible and accurately projected to the general public and by having their active input and participation; ideally they should want to own and implement them as they can reap some tangible benefits. Fifth, a sustained and effective communications and outreach programme which consistently engages the population at large is essential to ensure that the regional integration and community building efforts are truly in the public interest and have their active buy-in. Finally, there should also be a proper monitoring and evaluation system to measure and document the success or failure of each Asean undertaking.

In a recent report on the future challenges of Asean, I have therefore proposed that Asean should adopt by 2017, its golden jubilee year, indices to measure the public's sense of awareness, belonging and participation in Asean activities and also to gauge the degree of good neighbourliness, amity and cooperation displayed among the Asean peoples.

In addition, by 2020, Asean should undertake gap analysis for measuring disparities on gender, income and well-being, as well as other key socio-economic indicators and offer policy recommendations to address the discovered shortcomings.

Asean itself also has to make its modus operandi more accessible and relevant to the public if it wishes to really touch the hearts and minds of the people. It should be nimble, flexible and responsive to ever changing circumstances which implies a paradigm shift and fundamental change in the way of doing things. How well it achieves this will depend on its member countries' willingness to change gears or even the machinery itself. Only then would the much-heralded Asean Community likely become a positive sum game with win-win opportunities, thus making Asean's newly-declared slogan of "Forging Ahead Together" over the next decade a meaningful reality.

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