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Center for Southeast Asian Studies



Jindal School of International Affairs
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A REPORT OF

The Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) Jindal School of International Affairs

Public Lecture

on

The Role of Indonesia as a Big Brother in ASEAN: Past, Present and Future

4 October 2019



Indonesia is the world's third largest democracy in terms of population. It has the world's largest Muslim population, and it is also the largest country in Southeast Asia. Some say that Islam and democracy cannot coexist, but Indonesia has proven this assumption wrong by being a democratic country with a Muslim-majority population. To further expand the understanding of Indonesia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS), Jindal School of International Affairs organized a public lecture on 'The Role of Indonesia as a Big Brother in ASEAN: Past, Present and Future' on the 4th of October 2019 at O.P. Jindal Global University. The panel comprised of **Dr. Dani Muhtada**, Assistant Professor and Head of the Department, Constitutional and Administrative Law, and **Dr. Rodyah**, Dean of Faculty of Law, Semarang State University, Indonesia. The discussion was chaired by **Dr. Nehginpao Kipgen**, Associate Professor, Assistant Dean (International Collaboration) and Executive Director of CSEAS.



Dr. Muhtada began by speaking the history, culture, society and geography of Indonesia. He said that the title 'big brother' indicates some kind of a leadership role that Indonesia plays in ASEAN, which was founded by five members in 1967 - Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Malaysia. The objective of ASEAN is to: accelerate economic growth, social progress and cultural development in the region, to promote regional peace and stability, to promote active collaboration and mutual collaboration, to provide assistance to each other, to collaborate in agriculture and industries, to promote Southeast Asian studies, and to maintain close and beneficial cooperation with other organizations. He then articulated the fundamental principles of ASEAN: mutual respect, non-interference in the internal affairs of member states, consensus-based agreement, settlement of differences peacefully, renunciation of force and effective cooperation among member states.

Dr. Muhtada discussed the difference between ASEAN and the European Union (EU). He said the fundamental difference between the two bodies is that EU is a supranational organization, whereas ASEAN is an intergovernmental organization. The EU has a common currency (Euro), the EU parliament, a very powerful secretariat in the form of the European Commission, and decisions are made through a vote by members. The ASEAN, on the other hand, does not have a common currency, no parliament but an inter-parliamentary assembly, a relatively small and weak secretariat, and decisions are made through consensus by all members. The ASEAN community was started in 2003 and it is divided into three parts: ASEAN political-security community, ASEAN economic community, and ASEAN socio-cultural community. The ASEAN community aims at a stronger integration making ASEAN a cohesive, competitive, innovative and a dynamic economy. This also includes a rules-based community, peaceful and resilient region and a committed, participative and socially responsible community with the collective effort for the protection of human rights. The idea of ASEAN community is backed by the ASEAN charter which binds all members to the agreement and strives to make ASEAN a legal entity from a loose association.



Dr. Muhtada then went on to speak about the role of Indonesia in ASEAN and said that there is no formal leadership in ASEAN although Indonesia is considered the de facto leader. Indonesia has traditionally played a leadership role as it is the largest country in the region, contributing 36 percent of the total combined ASEAN gross domestic products, and it is the only G20 member from Southeast Asia. He discussed Indonesia's role in three parts - the past (1967-2014), the present (2014-2019) and the future. In the past (1967-1998) under Suharto, Indonesia took part in the creation of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, and she was also an effective mediator in the Cambodian conflict. But during Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Sukarnoputri era (1999-2004), Indonesia was busy with its domestic issues, which also led to the emergence of democracy, and therefore, played a passive role in ASEAN due to her own economic and political crises.

During Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono era (2004-2014), ASEAN became the cornerstone of Indonesia's foreign policy which led to the establishment of ASEAN charter in 2007. Indonesia under President Joko Widodo (2014-2019) seemed to be less interested in ASEAN. During this period, ASEAN was reduced to being “a cornerstone” from “the cornerstone” of Indonesia's foreign policy. The present government is apparently more focused on developing domestic infrastructure. Dr. Muhtada concluded that, with the re-election of Widodo in 2019, Indonesia's ASEAN policy will not be much different. However, since this is his second and last term in office, the president can now focus on improving relations with ASEAN along with domestic growth.

