

IS AN ASEAN IDENTITY POSSIBLE?

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Abstract - *This paper will try and provide conceptual ideas as to how ASEAN as a strictly intergovernmental organization can attempt to move forward and evolve into a dynamic organization that is capable of meeting immense challenges in its future dealings with the greater global world at large. The overriding concept will be the undisputed fact that ASEAN must proceed at an exceedingly swift fashion in its integration and identity formation of itself so as to take advantage of the time it has left before its regional hegemons China and India emerge to be global superpowers and find its niche so as to preclude being taken advantage of on an individual nation state basis.*

Keywords: ASEAN; ASEAN Identity; Identity; Regional Identity; ASEAN Community

INTRODUCTION

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was established in 1967 with the ASEAN Declaration, more commonly known as the Bangkok Declaration. The Bangkok Declaration is important in that it laid the foundation for membership criteria of ASEAN. To be a member of ASEAN is very straight forward, a state must exist in the geographic territory of 'Southeast Asia'. The reason for the quotation marks is over the very notion of Southeast Asia.

Emmerson has traced early writings in Western and Eastern history to notions of a sub-region dating back millennia. However, the modern understanding of Southeast Asia as it is currently configured can be traced to Lord Mountbatten's Southeast Asia Command of 1943 during World War II. Emmerson further traces this evolution from 1943 to the establishment of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in 1954 and the Association of Southeast Asia which finally morphed into ASEAN in 1967 (Emmerson, 1984). These previous iterations of Southeast Asia as a region lay in World War II planning and American planning in the early Cold War period. Regardless of the fluidness of SEATO, in 1967 with the Bangkok Declaration, Southeast Asia took on an international political character. The Bangkok Declaration clearly states in its fourth paragraph that "Association is open for participation to all States in the South-East Asian Region subscribing to the aforementioned aims, principles and purposes" (ASEAN, 1967). This characterization of Southeast Asia as a political unit was self-limiting during the Cold War as ASEAN member states were understood as being in the 'capitalist' or 'liberal economic' sphere and committed against the spread of communism within their domestic social and political systems. When the Cold War ended in 1991 and ASEAN expanded to include the former adversarial countries of Indochina and Myanmar, Southeast Asia as an international political entity and regional organization became clear. Southeast Asia as geographic entity would include the ten member states of ASEAN and perhaps ASEAN's two observer states eligible for membership, Timor-Leste and possibly Papua New Guinea (Maizland et al., 2023).

That being said the contemporary era is deluged with competition and pressures from all possible angles and imperatives both of an external and internal nature. Largely this is attributed to dynamic alterations brought on by globalization, liberalization of economies and overwhelming interconnectedness of the modern world in which we find ourselves interacting. Dimensions of Southeast Asian relations have undergone significant changes, especially with regards to the growing movement within ASEAN to conform to trends of democratization and more vocal private and more startlingly public advocacy to adhere to global standards. Even with this sort of significant progress, a disquieting reality has become self-evident. That is with the world moving towards greater and greater regionalization the middle power nation state is at a distinct disadvantage negotiating with integrated regional organizations and regional hegemons. There is near universal consensus that the only way for ASEAN and its member states to proceed is ahead. The crux of the debate on ASEAN is



how it can proceed along its path of integration at a pace and to a degree that is suitable and nationally sensitive to its members.

Perhaps, more to the point is how ASEAN as a regional organization and indeed as geopolitical construct of increasing importance can cultivate an overarching sense of 'oneness' or create a 'cultural identity' of its own built upon its diverse membership. If one looks upon regional organizations as an inevitable wave of the future, then Europe must be seen as a prototype for regional integration. The European Union is the world's most successful model of regional grouping. However, this paper will not consider the EU as a focal point but rather a reference point for ASEAN to strive for in terms of its overarching success. The EU as an intergovernmental structure has and is still fostering a synthetic version of 'European' culture and identity constructed upon itself by utilizing its member states as launching pads and content providers. This sort of 'culture' and 'identity' should be fostered by ASEAN to introduce, inculcate and create a sense of greater 'Asian' or more specifically 'Southeast Asian' identity among the regions' persons and nations.

Method and Purpose

The methodology utilized in this paper is one of modernity in the study of nations and nationalism. The purpose of modernity as a field of study is to attempt to understand the primary factors and trajectories for the development of nation states from agrarian to developing, and if successful to developed nations with a cohesive sense of identity. Within the field of identity studies there are three primary scholars, though by no means is the field limited to the following scholars. Ben Anderson argues that modern European nation states found their primary impetus for national cohesion in the technology of the printing press (Anderson, 1991). The spread of information, knowledge created a field of understanding where disparate communities could connect, if at least ephemerally through the medium of ideas which sprung from capitalist accumulation. Gellner argued that modern nation states emerged from the forces of capitalism which dictated a demand of semi-literate populations which could only be supplied by the state. This demand of industrial capitalism pushed European states to develop unified education systems, legal systems to protect property, form cohesive and singular monetary systems whilst pushing high cultures downwards to form a cohesive national identity (Gellner, 1983). Smith presupposes that some, though not all, states can form the nucleus of their national identities from a premodern past based on rediscovered cosmologies of emergence and histories that can be traced to the present and are representations of past which has been found again (Smith, 1995). Within the field of regionalism the primary point of identity studies above the nation state level is within the European Union.

The European Union has been attempting to establish a nascent sense of Europeanness among the populations of member states from many years. Bergbauer (2018) points to 1973 as the primary starting point for the European Commission's attempts to establish a European identity by establishing a framework for identity among its member states best seen in the first direct elections to the European Parliament (Bergbauer, 2018). Needless to say the idea of Europe and being European is highly contested one and can consist of geography, history, political values among other variables (Hudson, 2000). This puts the individual at the center of forming collective identity. In this sense Tajfel's Social Identity Theory sits front and center with the understanding that individual identity formation is based upon the notion that humans are social animals which derive their sense of self from identification with the larger community at large (Checkel, 2001; Tajfel, 1981). The process of identification and segmentation to create the 'other' is fundamental in the psychological sense of individuals and groups demand to understand themselves by placing themselves as referents to 'others' in order to understand and identify themselves (Cram, 2007; David and Bar-Tal, 2009; Easton, 1965). Hooghe and Verhaegen argue that in order to create a regional identity there needs to be basis of 'trust' (Hooghe and Verhaegen, 2017). Trust in this context must be generated by both the member states and regional level of comingling policy formation and implementation. Implicit in this understanding is the very real understanding that Europeans have a clear understanding of their national identity first and foremost. They then need to be inculcated with the sense of Europeanness as a nested identity which complements their national identity and does not undermine the previous but coexists within the confines of value, functional and normative understanding (Faist, 2001).



A primary conjunction point of identity formation in the European Union experience is one of cultural vs. civic identification. The scholarly literature has found a connection between both of these variables. This is indicative of European identity of a transnational character being linked to both a cultural spatial and value-based understanding among the population writ large (Fligstein et. al., 2012; Green, 2007; Risse, 2010).

The European experience through the scholarly lens argues that in order to create a European identity there must be an understanding, affinity and connection of legitimacy as perceived through the public of regional level institutions that flows through national level institutions (Kohn, 1944). That awareness and legitimate perception is grounded at the level of common values among the public as exhibited in substantive quality at the regional level (Hooghe and Verhaegen, 2017; Hülse, 2006; Magonette, 1998; Smith, 1992).

The European experience is one of not achieving the stated aims of a regional identity. The EU even with having common policies that benefit European publics, a common travel area and borderless regional space, education and awareness policies have not managed to complement or supplant national identities across the continent (Arts and Halman, 2006; Breitmoser, 2021; Carey, 2002; Fossum, 2001; Luedtke, 2005; Vink, 2001). The glaring example of this is Brexit which was based on Euroskepticism and a rejection of the supranationalism toward British nationalism (Carl et al., 2018; Leith et al., 2019; (Van Der Zwet et al., 2020). Modernity as a field will be the primary theoretical field with which to study the possible emergence of an ASEAN identity among the 500+ million citizens currently residing within ASEAN member states. Modernity as articulated by the Anderson, Gellner and Smith will focus on forging an embryotic sense of regional identity through institutional forms of state capacity, namely economic cooperation, student mobility and educational awareness through state-based institutions.

An ASEAN Community

In 2005 ASEAN leaders committed to establishing an ASEAN Community which would “foster a community of caring societies and promote a common regional identity” (ASEAN, 2005). The community vision of ASEAN leaders laid down in the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 consists of the three ASEAN community pillars. These three pillars of ASEAN cooperation and integration are the ASEAN Political Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC). At the 37th ASEAN Summit held in Hanoi in 2020, ASEAN leaders outlined their brief on an ASEAN identity as being “ASEAN Identity shall strengthen the ASEAN Community. ASEAN Identity will enhance common values with a higher degree of we-feeling and sense of belonging and sharing in all the benefits of regional integration” (ASEAN, 2020). ASEAN leaders elaborated further on this notion as being founded in the foundational principles of ASEAN as a regional organization. This is found in ASEAN’s legal documents, namely the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (Bali Concord I) and the ASEAN Charter. This articulate that ASEAN as an intergovernmental regional organization is founded on the principles of sovereign equality and sovereignty of member states, non-interference in the internal affairs of states, peaceful settlement of disputes (ASEAN, 1976a; ASEAN, 1976b; ASEAN, 2008).

It is this formulation of identity which is the keystone of ASEAN identity. One which is determined in a top-down manner by leaders operating on a consensus basis and implementing versions or visions of ASEANness within their respective member states. At the 37th ASEAN Summit leaders provided a heuristic logic to the notion of an ‘historic’ oneness which is nearly a cosmology rooted in a prehistoric and pre-political past of shared values which are found in the present incarnation of a regional organization representing the political level of ten societies (ASEAN, 2020). Leaders articulated that the present is composed of “Inherited Values are defined as values that the people of Southeast Asia region ascribe to, which have been passed on for generations, through the natural process of human interaction that develops into various type of communities with much similarities” (Ibid). It is worth quoting at long length the heuristic version of an ASEAN identity to gain insights into what an ASEAN identity may be, as understood through the lens of regional elites.



“The values shared by ASEAN member states have existed in Southeast Asian countries long before the establishment of ASEAN. All characteristics, values and shared values as well as rich traditions in Southeast Asian is part of our future vision and culture, as we progress in strengthening the ASEAN Community. A continuing process of acculturation will further enrich and strengthen the ASEAN Community.

The traditions, customs and beliefs since the pre-historic era laid the foundation of the process of an ethnic community blending in Southeast Asia. Some of the local ethnics stayed in certain areas, and some migrated for survival. Those who migrated created a chain of interaction between ethnic groups. As a result, the process of acculturation of ethnics and cultures has continued throughout history. The introduction to the techniques and tradition of music, writing, dancing, sailing, trading, farming, rituals, ceremonies, culinary, healing practices and local traditions such as puppetry provided the opportunity to preserve these cultures.

This process of interaction and acculturation continued to take place during the era of Ancient Kingdoms in Southeast Asia through alliances, marriages, barter, quests, migration, new territorial conquest, among others. From the era of ancient kingdoms (ca 2 AD) until the age of discovery (ca 15 AD), missionaries and trading activities, especially from overseas merchants, triggered human interaction and social constructions. During that time, the Southeast Asian region was believed to be receptive to foreign cultures, such as those from China, India, the Middle East and Europe. For a certain period of time, Southeast Asia was a periphery in which its cultures were formed and originated from all various traditions, customs, beliefs and religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.

After centuries of being at the periphery, the process of acculturation is inevitably-forming new varieties of cultures and civilizations throughout Southeast Asian countries. This acculturation later on facilitated the evolution of a pluralistic community in Southeast Asia that is not only adaptable and resilient but also appreciates and respects diversity. This acculturation enabled values such as spiritualism, kinship, communitarian/communalism, collectivism, tolerance, humility, social harmony, solidarity, humanity, among others” (Ibid).

This quote, while extensive provides some insights into what an ASEAN identity may be as well as its unique characteristics. First, there is the notion of a shared culture found in values which are extrapolations of ASEAN principles. Second, is the notion of heterogeneous ethnic grouping with roots in East, South and Southwest Asia. These roots are expressed in dance, music, writing, rice culture and other symbolic formations. Lastly, is the reference to multireligious heritage which are not indigenous to the region itself.

Needless to say this is a very odd and patchwork foundation for building an identity as it arises not from a singularity but a multiplicity and is reductively distilled down to basic norms of interaction (sovereignty and non-intervention) and decision making (consultation and consensus). Notwithstanding the uneven fit of this identity-based logic is the political articulation to create some notion of a common Southeast Asian identity with regional reach.

Identity and the Construct of Nations

It goes without saying that identity is very complex notion and often a highly contested notion. This is especially true of countries which are still in the early stages of nation building.¹ This does not imply that there is a single linear endpoint for identity. On the contrary, national identity is a social construction which is founded upon belief and continuous practice to consistently reinforce notions

¹ It must be noted that nation building is a never-ending process of social construction. However, it much also be noted that long established countries with a sense of nationhood such as the United Kingdom, France or the United States took, in some cases many hundreds of years to establish.



of belonging to 'a nation'. Put simply, nation building never stops. However, the longer, more consistent and unified the symbolic and interactive process is, tends to lead to a deeper notion and internalized sense of belonging to a nation of people, hence the connection to an individual and collective identity. Identity in this sense commonly refers to a person (individual and collective) sense of being unique and different. This is usually bound in physical markers or social attributes such as ethnicity, religion, values and norms which exhibit themselves as outward patterns of behavior.

Implicit in the notion of identity is the understanding of community or some external anchoring or reference point for which individuals can center their sense of self. The community as such is an instrumental point of bonds for social cohesion and relations which are best summed up by American political scientists Ernst Haas who understands this as 'trust, friendship, complementarity, and responsiveness (Haas, 1973 p. 116). Secondly, community and communities are not only just social groupings that provide group cohesion but also cultural and physical attributes that provide a common 'display of mutual responsiveness, confidence, and esteem, and who self-consciously self-identify (Puchala, 1984 p. 186-187). As such identity is a socially constructed form of identity which forms the nucleus of habit-forming behavior, socialization, norms and institutions inform action (Acharya, 2017).

Eminent scholars in the field of nation building and nationalism point towards a couple of important factors which are germane to the discussion at present. A primary field of nationalism and nation building is modernity or the study of important factors in bridging societies in their tradition forms to their contemporary forms. Put simply what are important factors that lead to modernization and change of a society's foundational cultural, social, economic and political structures and their outwards expressions.

Benedict Anderson in his studies of nationalism in Europe but by extension Asia argued that modern societies are 'imagined'. Imagined in this sense does not imply an artificialness but rather the elite use of the printing press and mass production of knowledge and ideas as a basis for modern identity (Anderson, 1991). The building of identity is not neutral in the sense of where ideas originate or the choice of ideas but rather a project of elite inculcation of mass populations using a standardized text of vularization and the mass spread of elite ideas over a populace. Ernest Gellner argues that industrial society and outgrowth of industrialization is the primary motivator for modern identity forms. Gellner argues that historically, the private sector produced demand which was supplied belatedly by the state for economic development and private accumulation. This took the form a having a standard national language, exo-education or education of a basic primary nature with elite culture providing the overlay of cultural and social norms (Gellner, 1983). Anthony Smith takes the view that some societies choose to use ethnicity as a focal point for identity formation. In this context he argues that identity of an ethno variety is in fact constructs of a past which often includes a cosmology and foundation in the present of a prehistoric and premodern past which is the continuum of the present people who ascribe to the identity form (Smith, 1995). These three examples are pertinent to the discussion as the previous section elaboration demonstrates. The ASEAN notion of identity as put forth by its political elite are grounded in these scholars' examples and arguments of modernity mixing with an ethno premodern past connected to some rudimentary notion of regional oneness. In this context it must be noted that there are severe limitations which will be touched upon in the following sections. In the context of forming a transnational identity modernity and the twinning of transnational identity markers and materialist considerations are the most viable pathway for forming some notion of 'ASEANness' among the region's diverse populations.

Education & Identity

Southeast Asian identity is a difficult concept to pinpoint. When attempts to conceive of what exactly Asia is, problems begin to occur as Wiessala illustrates "Asia is an immense and heterogeneous political, economic and geographic space, its sheer size and diversity constitute a set of circumstances that makes it difficult to devise any one policy prescription-or description-for the entire region." (Wiessala, 2002 p. 3). Even within the context of sub regional grouping Southeast Asia



is a cultural enigma. Within this framework of problematic identification and given severe economic disparities and political underdevelopment within ASEAN this writer takes the point that 'identity' formation should be a priority for ASEAN and its members as it would behoove all concerned to begin some form of supranational integration. Supranational integration of ASEAN should follow a distinctly federalist perspective of constructivism in a non-intrusive form that can still be managed with limited intergovernmentalism by member states but be paralleled by greater ASEAN involvement in generating sense of self and greater purpose to ASEAN citizens at large via education.

Education is a primary means of establishing a sense of political nationhood and the identity surrounding a geographic area, ethnic group, or political entity. If this is taken as a premise then one can perhaps surmise that education should be utilized as a front running medium for the creation of basis construct of identity surrounding the political/economic identity of ASEAN. Perspectives concerning education as a means to an end in terms of identification can be seen in works by Moles who attributes great importance to education, describing it as "one of the processes by which this past is incorporated in the present to fashion the future...organizing the sum of knowledge acquired by the community to aid the individual to take his useful place in society in a spirit of solidarity." (UNESCO, 1981). If this is taken as a basic foundation of education as a vehicle for transmission of ideas/ideals to an elite demographic, it cannot be assumed that it will be value free, in which case Durkheim surmises that "education is necessarily a deliberate and value-laden (moral) enterprise." (Pai et al., 2006). Given that nation states as political entities are a top-down form of social organization which ASEAN as a regional body is founded upon, then one can make a reasonable assumption that creation of a permanent base of ASEAN studies and research for future integration should be undertaken to provide a basis for future integration of ASEAN as a whole. In the eclectic view of Oriental relations which this paper is focused, education as a vehicle for cultural exchange should be considered a buttress for ASEAN's internal as well as future external relations policies.

On the surface education service integration may seem a mundane or banal matter; conjuring contemplation toward the gist of ASEAN engagement in education development and exportation may perhaps appear rather straightforward and in line with idealism or altruistic intentions. But on a very real plain of consideration ASEAN might find its niche in trying to provide its members an avenue to get its 'own house' in order to that intra ASEAN ties can be bound by fostering a young and emergent class of citizens that identify both with their nations of origin and a greater ASEAN identification that supersedes the state itself.

Thus, education seems a rather decent place to begin with in terms of integration and identity creation. If one takes the EU model of parallel policy implementations one begins to see the necessities that bind the greater symbiotic relationship that exists between the greater organization and its parts embodied in member states. In its 1994 Asia strategy paper EU policy direction is seen as preclusive to future economic engagement founded on a greater awareness that can be fostered via education inputs as "the costs of failing to develop pro-active strategies towards Asia, the Union stands to lose out on the economic miracle taking place there because of the strong competition: from Japan and the United States, and also increasingly from companies within the region's newly industrialized and capital rich countries such as Korea or Taiwan." (European Commission, 1994).

In particular tertiary education as to diffuse 'European' values and EU agenda imperatives as Corbett explains is strategic in that "without the idea of the university as an institution creating and diffusing knowledge and democratic values in a way which is intrinsically international, this policy history of higher education could not have existed." (Corbett, 2003). The university as an agent of policy has a large degree of culpability within the framework of strategic utility in as far as culture fomentation. As Mitchell explains "the university is a means of social as well as educational evolution, for it disseminates ideas, and ideologies, across traditional barriers; in the process it creates elites, which give their own particular focus to accumulated learning and experience. It creates these elites not only by teaching but also by bestowing qualifications which distinguish those who are predictably going to occupy leading positions in research, education, communication, administration, the profession and the bureaucracy." (Mitchell, 1986 p. 204) If we consider education as a sectoral locality of high culture cultivation and dissemination of the like, then a premise of the university as



an institution of primary cultural diffusion could be an accurate locale to begin programs aimed at shaping culture perspectives from the top down. Bohlin accords great influence to the university as an institution of molding as “university students are at a particularly impressionable stage in their lives.” (Bobin, 2005 p. 103). Even top-level political officials such as Secretary of State Colin Powell promote higher education as a source of invaluable cultural tribute “I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here.” (Nye, 2004 p. 44). The university therefore can be considered a prime target with regard to culture diffusion and a base in which to conduct potentially long-lasting soft power effects that can be beneficial to a wide range of actors involved. If one takes the premise that ‘elite’ guidance and opinion can propel a nations policy and these ‘elites’ within political and business spectrums are by and large educated in the sense of achieving some sort of tertiary education, then one could see the university as a primary starting point for planting of ideas and concepts to be disseminated and grown.

Within the context of this paper it should be noted that ideas of supranational structures comprised exclusively in the realm of ASEAN education and tertiary student mobility should not be construed to indicate some grandiose dream of ASEAN as a single structure with supranationalism as an overriding ethos. To this date ASEAN still is a functioning Free Trade Area and many of its inhabitants struggle to merely survive in large parts of its entire geography. As late as 2006 ASEAN education ministers confirmed that greater cooperation should be striven for in generating ASEAN cohesiveness and securing its uncertain future, this should be seen through the prism of collective awareness of need and acceptance. ASEAN operates a virtual university with its own curriculum but this a program that is operating on an individual basis of students studying in certain institutions in their own nations. It would seem useful if not essential for ASEAN to have funds and leverage to manage internal student flows in terms of providing maximum advantage and opportunity for tertiary students to study in different countries and focus on research that can contribute significantly to fostering an ‘ASEAN identity’ of sorts. Whether this identity is artificial and students are given an “ASEAN” passport for the duration of their studies and/or other material sorts of cultural identifiers to help foster awareness and attachment to this organization is indeed considerable.

From a structural theory perspective perhaps the greater widening of EU interests is due to what Allen and Smith term the logic of ‘functional spillover’ whereby “actors may have to push for institutionalization in one domain to achieve goals in another domain.” (Smith, 2004 p. 33). Spillover as goal should be looked upon as a positive derivative of regional integration for it signifies a greater sense of commonality and convergence of national destinies. If it is managed correctly to diffuse characteristics in its subjects it can prove to be a powerful force that is nearly unstoppable. When I speak of supranationalism in small compartmentalized space I simply mean that ASEAN can attempt to create a greater sense of itself without trying to impose itself on moving to quick in sensitive areas of economic, trade, politics and security and leave the greater good of integration in the sphere of something benign such as tertiary student mobility. If this proves to be a success and ASEAN can work better as a group and perhaps can help drive ASEAN towards a greater good and deeper integration in the future while filling the void of education deficiencies in many of its member states. The EU is using education as a means to an ultimate end in terms of formulating a greater awareness of itself globally and creating identity formulation by its various internal programs on the European continent. This is not an impossibility but I do believe it to be an imperative that should be undertaken with haste. ASEAN and a majority of its member states are far behind the curve in terms of overall national development and regional development. If ASEAN hopes to be an entity to be reckoned with in the future it needs to move at pace that will further its integration immediately or suffer from being taken advantage of and picked apart by its future Asian regional superpowers and other global superpowers.

Jones has argued that to help foster an ASEAN identity there must be a twin focus on a macro level indicator of poverty alleviation as a developmental goal for ASEAN. This pushes towards the functional notion of an ASEAN identity as being a common good which can be identified at the regional level. Furthermore, Jones argues the community or civic education and the establishing of a common education curriculum based on cultural and social commonalities along with mass outreach can help



to build, at least a nascent identity form (Jones, 2004). Rattanaseeve echoes this point by demonstrating that ASEAN elites do indeed want an ASEAN identity but this must come through the ten member states education systems in tandem via the socio-cultural community pillar (Rattanaseeve, 2023). Bañez and Callo have shown in small scale studies in the Philippines that commonality can be found in students through the use of literary curriculum (Bañez & Callo, 2022). Chongkittavorn has noted the massive degree not only of development levels but political and social systems within ASEAN and as such whilst the impetus for pushing an ASEAN identity may come from elite levels, identity formation will have to take place at the civil society level (Chongkittavorn, 2019). The notion of a transnational ASEAN identity spreading from the civic non-governmental level is possible but the process would be prohibitively long without governmental support. Azmawati and Quayle have argued that a possible vector for identity formation at the ASEAN level can be at the educational level within member state by instituting some basic form of ASEAN studies to raise awareness (Azmawati & Quayle, 2016). This seems a feasible solution until one takes into context that most ASEAN states are still within the process of nation building and it is very difficult to identify from a citizen's perspective the tangible benefits of ASEAN membership to national populations. Whilst, approaching transnational ASEAN identity from the perspective of awareness may be simple it is the most viable option. If a common understanding of what ASEAN is and how it impacts the individual it is the only viable baseline path towards a common understanding and connection among populations which have very little in common which will be elaborated on below.

Competency, Capacity and Regional Organizations

When taken in comparison the world's two oldest standing regional organizations have markedly different forms, functions, competencies and capacity. The ASEAN Secretariat has a miniscule budget of \$20 million whilst the EU has over €180 billion (Destradi, 2019). As such while the EU Commission enjoys a significant amount of independence, capacity and competency the ASEAN Secretariat has little and as Muller argues lies in the shadow of member states (Müller, 2023). The ASEAN Summit or Heads of Government/State enjoy full veto rights due to the consensus principle whereas the Council takes decisions on a majority of issues according to weighted majority voting. ASEAN has no correlate to the EU Parliament with all ASEAN agreements being agreed upon at the Summit level. Lastly, ASEAN has no correlate to the EU Commission as all ASEAN agreements are undertaken by member states and implementation of agreements are taken at the member state level within national bureaucracies. There is a broad literature on the democratic deficit within the EU but this is a unit centered analysis which is correctly situated at the regional level as there are supranational institutions with a degree of democratic authenticity and legitimacy to be brought into question (Crombez, 2003; Katz, 2001; Norris, 1997).

The ASEAN Secretariat employs just over 300 persons with an annual budget that has not increased in over a decade and stands at \$20 million and does not have the capacity to act independently as the European Commission (Jones, 2017; Müller, 2023). Furthermore, the Secretariat is acts solely within the confines of what member states allow, which is to only as a secretary for the member states. The primary work or regionalism takes place at the member state level within government ministries rather than at the regional level of Jakarta. The ASEAN Secretariat in 2018 published a report which identified support and awareness of ASEAN initiatives, projects and integration at between 50-80% (ASEAN, 2018). Upon closer inspection the report's methodology only consists of 401 interviews with largely business stakeholders (Ibid). This methodology while interesting is not representative of a baseline population of civil society, youth or other stakeholders, not to mention interviews are limited at only 401 of a population of over 500 million (Ibid). The report while providing insights leads to conclusions which should be viewed skeptically.

Political and Ethnic Diversity in ASEAN

The 10 member states of ASEAN constitute a highly diverse political and ethnic space. Currently, in ASEAN there exists an absolute monarchy in Brunei, a military dictatorship in Myanmar, two socialist states of Lao PDR and Vietnam, three emerging democracies of Indonesia, Singapore and Philippines and two anocracies of Cambodia and Thailand. This is further overlaid by diversity of religious affinity among the countries which includes majority Islamic, Buddhist, Catholic and various indigenous and



animist traditions. This is to say there is no common spatial civic or cultural norms/values with which to build a transnational identity in ASEAN. Natalegawa has argued that “ASEAN’s multifaceted diversity - political, economic and social - the task of attaining agreement and consensus among its Member States is unlikely to become any easier” (Natalegawa, 2018 p. 28). This is instructive in the sense that the primary connective tissue that exists between the ten ASEAN members is one of history and opposition to colonial domination and intrusion and a materialist interest-based understanding of national economic and social development. It needs to be stated that this are historical and materialist notions of identity connection at the elite level which are defined for the general population.

Table 1 Types of Domestic Governance in ASEAN

	Absolute Monarchy	Constitutional Monarchy	Plural Democracy	Anocracy	Communist Party Rule	Military Rule
Brunei	X					
Cambodia				X		
Indonesia			X			
Lao PDR					X	
Malaysia			X			
Myanmar						X
Philippines			X			
Singapore				X		
Thailand		X		X		
Vietnam					X	

*Adapted from CIA Factbook, IFES Election Guide & Freedom House Data. Available at: (Central Intelligence Agency, 2023; Freedom House, 2023; International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2023).

*Anocracy is defined as a system of governance with elections but Freedom House index is below 50/100 (Not Free)

This is for a comparative contrast to the aforementioned notion of ‘intergovernmental democracy’

Table 2 Freedom House Index 1995-2020

	1995-1996	2000-2001	2005-2006	2010-2011	2015	2020
Brunei	6	6	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.5
Cambodia	6	6	5.5	5.5	5.5	6
Indonesia	6.5	3.5	3.5	2.5	3	3
Lao PDR	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5	6.5
Malaysia	4.5	5	4	4	4	4
Myanmar	7	7	7	7	6	5.5
Singapore	5	5	4.5	4.5	4	4
Thailand	3.5	2.5	2.5	4.5	5.5	5
Philippines	3	2.5	2.5	3.5	3	3.5
Vietnam	7	6.5	6.5	6	6	6

*Adapted from Freedom House Data 1995-2020. (Freedom House, 2023)

Freedom House Index classifies states according to the following metric [1-2.5 Free, 3-5 Partly Free, 5.5-7 Not Free]

CONCLUSION

It has been argued that the notion of an ASEAN identity is an extremely difficult proposition to not only imagine but more pointedly to construct. ASEAN’s diversity of religions, political systems, social understandings and economic development levels harken an extremely difficult path forward.



However, diversity can not be a point of contention but a point of inflection to find solace and strength. It is easier to point to what ASEAN identity is not than to point to what it is. As such starting point would be in contradistinction to ASEAN's others, namely the European Union and a colonial past. This would point of pride for ASEAN people's as hard-fought independence and regional principles of sovereignty and non-intervention are the bedrock of the national independence movements. Furthermore, the commonality of struggle would point towards each ASEAN member state as a being distinct but having a common heritage point of political struggle which is a unifying factor. This regional 'nationalism' can be a point of educational awareness and oneness or point of regional pride. It goes without saying that ASEAN will never an analogue or carbon copy version of the European Union but it can build a nascent form of identity through awareness of ASEAN first and foremost. Most citizens of ASEAN countries do not know what ASEAN does or how it impacts there lives. This is a point of entry for building a notion of ASEAN identity as there exists a blank slate of sorts. Lastly, modernity as a process is one which is not linear but an extension of the past as presented in the current. All ASEAN states aspire to be developed and high income. This is a common destiny founded in development, a common good that while contested in terms of direction is not contested in terms of functionality. If educational programs can spread and inform ASEAN citizens about ASEAN greater awareness can be built and programs at higher levels of education including the tertiary level can be developed and mandated. This is the model in the European Union whereby education systems include education on the regional organization at a compulsory level to raise awareness. If this can be accomplished an ASEAN identity may someday be possible, though not in the near future.

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