



IDSS COMMENTARIES (03/2005)

IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.

TSUNAMI: NATURE'S TEST FOR ASEAN'S NEW LEADERSHIP

Yang Razali Kassim*

12 January 2005

THE tsunami calamity that hit Asia on December 26 was as much a tragedy for ASEAN, the Association of South-east Asian Nations. Of the 12 countries affected, three - Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand – are ASEAN members. This is the first major natural catastrophe that the South-east Asian region has experienced in its modern history. Coming at a time of political change and transition in the grouping, the tsunami disaster is a major test for the new generation of ASEAN leaders who have just emerged on the scene. How these new leaders respond to this monumental challenge from Nature and how they live up to their tasks as heads of government will not only influence the course of ASEAN cohesion in the coming years but also shape international opinion of the grouping.

Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, whose country has been hardest hit, was sworn in on October 20 – or just about two months before the tsunami strike which killed more than 114,000 people in Aceh. Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was appointed prime minister to succeed Dr Mahathir Mohamad on November 1, 2003. He was confirmed as UMNO president, which justifies his position as prime minister, on Sept 23 – or just three months before the tsunami tragedy, which also hit Penang, his home state. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was sworn in as successor to Mr Goh Chok Tong on August 12, four months before the tsunami disaster. Only three other ASEAN leaders from the six original members of ASEAN have served longer -- Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Brunei's Sultan and Prime Minister Hassanal Bolkiah. In other words, of the original ASEAN Six, half their leaders – which is not a small proportion -- are new to the job as heads of government.

The emergence of the three new leaders has several implications for ASEAN. They have to develop regional statesmanship and reach out to their counterparts even as they try to anchor themselves on the ground at home. Their ability, or otherwise, of extending their hands across the borders will determine their acceptability as regional leaders in the eyes of their neighbours. In other words, their diplomatic skills will influence ASEAN unity and cohesion at the highest level, with repercussions seeping down to the ground.

ASEAN cohesion, at this juncture, sorely needs to be rebuilt. The grouping has been adrift since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. This is especially so after Indonesia was hit by the financial turmoil and subsequently looked inwards, abandoning its implicit role as a regional leader. The decline of its regional influence rendered ASEAN rudderless and affected the group's solidarity. To worsen the situation, the 1997 turmoil also generated friction between

Indonesia and Singapore and Indonesia and Malaysia. Indeed, the post-1997 years have been a trying period for ASEAN because this was when several bilateral disputes afflicted the three member states, including between Singapore and Malaysia. Although serious efforts are being made to tackle them, these disputes remain largely unresolved.

ASEAN regional integration consequently slowed down and it took a good six to seven years before a turn-around could be seen, peaking with the ASEAN summit in Vientiane, Laos three months ago, which paved the way for more free trade pacts between ASEAN and its key trading partners. The ASEAN drift could have been worse had there not been a push by Singapore for bilateral and regional free trade areas with non-ASEAN states, such as China, Japan and India, to offset the sluggish pace of intra-ASEAN integration.

The role of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in rebuilding ASEAN cohesion cannot be underestimated. The three countries are considered by some analysts as the core states of the regional grouping. Each of them has its own strategic influence on the region. When the interests of the three countries converge and they are able to act collectively, they tend to determine the pace and direction of ASEAN as a group. The tsunami disaster therefore provides an opportunity for the three leaders - Prime Minister Lee, President Yudhoyono and Prime Minister Abdullah -- to come together and act decisively to forge the region's response to the tragedy - and in the process create an impact for themselves as the new leaders who will shape ASEAN in the new century.

In this regard, Prime Minister Lee's swift and decisive role in promoting a collective ASEAN response to the disaster was catalytic. It will also prove to be his imprimatur on the region. Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong said that the tsunami disaster was the first major test facing Singapore's new team of leaders, and that Prime Minister Lee had responded well to the challenge. Mr Goh's assessment is not just applicable to Mr Lee as a Singapore leader but also as a future ASEAN statesman. Mr Lee knew exactly what needed to be done and acted without delay. Apart from dispatching aid quickly to the areas hit by the tragedy, he triggered off a chain of decisions that culminated in the ASEAN-led tsunami summit on January 6 hosted by Indonesia. The upshot was an unprecedented action plan that included a regional tsunami early warning system. Equally significant was the mobilization of the international community in an outpouring of shared humanity.

Singapore under Mr Lee has done much beyond its small size, and in so doing, shows that it feels very much for the region. Apart from exercising its international influence to mobilize world support, it has also raised at least US\$13 million worth of funding, sent 900 uniformed personnel to Aceh, deployed aircraft, landing ships, helicopters as well as opened up its air and naval facilities to all countries helping in the massive relief and reconstruction effort. Malaysia, under Mr Abdullah, has also played its part despite being hit by the catastrophe, with 68 of its people dead. Aside from donating RM 20 million, it has turned the Subang military airport into an airhub to ferry international aid to Aceh. It has also deployed transport planes and heavy equipment as well as supplies of medicine, food, water and volunteers.

What ASEAN needs henceforth is more than an effective regional programme on disaster management. To borrow President Yudhoyono's words, the region must build on a "culture of solidarity" so that states can secure themselves "not only from the fury of national disasters but also the folly of human conflict".

The tsunami disaster has shown an innate capacity of the three ASEAN states to band

together quickly and display empathy and care for each other in times of severe crisis. In so doing, they have shown that it is possible, when the crunch comes, to put politics aside and work together in a spontaneous outpouring of shared humanity. If the new leadership can carry this spirit into the future, *sans* the baggage of the past, they will be able to usher in a new era in which ASEAN stands for the convergence of caring societies. It has taken a massive tragedy to show that the vision of the region's leaders for an ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community is not a pipedream. With political will of the highest order, this vision can be achieved in the coming years. The new leaders of ASEAN will be laying its foundation well if they are able to respond to this monumental test cohesively, decisively and as fellow human beings.

* Yang Razali Kassim is Senior Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University.