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# Can Najib walk the talk on Asean?

## Khoo Ying Hooi



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**KHOO YING HOOI**

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*Asean celebrated its 47th birthday on August 8. But how many of us are in the know about such an important day?*

The first time I wrote about Asean Day was back in 2010.

In last week's column titled, "The missing Asean-ness", I again wrote about the vision of an Asean community and how important it is to us, the Asean citizens a.k.a. the Asean-nites.

2015 is an important year for Asean because it is the deadline of the Asean community, more so for Malaysia, as the country



will

assume the Asean chairmanship.

Hence, in today's column, I decided to write on the same topic but focusing on the role of the Malaysian government as Asean chair in 2015.

As far as I know, two forums were held last Friday in conjunction with the 47th anniversary of the founding of Asean.

First was a roundtable discussion organised by the Global Movement of Moderates (GMM), Society for the Promotion of Human Rights (Proham), Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute (ASLI) and National Organising Committee of the Asean Civil Society

Conference/Asean People's Forum (ACSC/APF), in which I had the opportunity to participate.

The second forum was organised by ASLI, while the Malaysian government who will assume the Asean chairmanship in 2015 opted to issue an official statement.

I quote: "... As chairman, we are expected to lead and drive efforts to strengthen Asean beyond 2015... For the government, it is our desire to increase the participation of all stakeholders in Asean activities. It is for this reason that we chose 'People-Centred Asean' as the central theme of Malaysia's chairmanship in 2015... To ensure the involvement of all Malaysians in this noble endeavour, the government will intensify efforts to ensure that Asean is brought closer to the people. We will intensify our efforts in the coming months to increase the awareness of the public about Asean..."

Last April, during the opening session of the National Colloquium on Malaysia's chairmanship of Asean 2015, the prime minister delivered a similar message.

I quote: "A 'People-Centred Asean' will see the more direct involvement of all sectors of society in Asean's activities. No longer will Asean be the domain of the elites and specialists alone. An Asean Community, which is people-centred, will truly be 'One Asean For All'."

Summing up, the prime minister seemed to acknowledge the crucial role of civil society in advancing the ambitious idea of an Asean community.

Whether the prime minister is going to walk the talk remains to be seen.

But at this stage, what the prime minister has said is critically significant in ensuring a dream come true for the Asean community.

Malaysia has a huge role to

play in Asean as it is expected to lead the way for the Asean community.

How can the civil society – like us – assist in achieving such an ambitious goal?

In last Friday's forum, I had the opportunity to share my thoughts with the audience, focusing on two themes: awareness and engagement.

Awareness is critical because it is the major weakness of Asean. It is important, more so in educating youths about the roles they can play as Asean citizens. It is essential for Asean citizens to realise that whatever policies or regulations formulated by Asean leaders could impact us.

As for engagement, I divided it into two levels: The first refers to engaging with policy-makers at the level of Asean. The second is about how the civil society can engage with ordinary citizens who are

not in touch with the processes of Asean – this is an area that is neglected.

Although the Malaysian government has repeatedly emphasised educating the public about Asean, to this stage, unfortunately, they have failed miserably.

It is my sincere hope that this time around, since the Malaysian government has opted for the theme “People-Centred Asean”, they must not only talk the talk but also walk the talk.

Generally, civil society groups through the ACSC/APF have limited access to key policy-makers of Asean. But that does not mean there is nothing that we can do.

Let us also not forget our role, which is to disseminate information on the Asean community to others.

The attitude of the Malaysian government towards the Asean progress generally has not been responsive; rather it is unenthusiastic. In many

events, the Malaysian government is still reluctant to take the diplomatic leap of genuinely addressing the issues.

In short, the government needs to be more engaging with the civil society and its citizens. All this must start within the country before it actually looks at the concept from the regional perspective. – August 11, 2014.

*\* This is the personal opinion of the writer or publication and does not necessarily represent the views of The Malaysian Insider.*

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The simple straightforward answer is: "NO!" And the reason is because since he came into office, Najib's principal approach to governing the nation is through the cultivation of disunity among the rakyat. A "leader" who thrives by cultivating disunity in his own country cannot be expected to build a people-centred ASEAN; he just wouldn't know how to!!!

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