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OPINION

# The missing Asean-ness

## Khoo Ying Hooi



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Published: 4 August 2014

*Is it possible to have an Asean Community by 2015? This question has been on my head since the idea was first mooted.*

Many, including myself, would like to believe that an Asean Community could be a reality by 2015, but the present state of Asean is not too convincing for such an ambitious idea.

Asean was founded in 1967. However, after more than four decades, it remains an association isolated from the ordinary Asean citizens or, Asean-nites.

In the past, I have had opportunities to deal with



policy-makers at the Asean level,

particularly on human rights. Sadly, up to now, I still do not feel much Asean-ness in myself.

To many, Asean is a government affair and it is difficult for ordinary citizens to relate themselves with the concept of an Asean Community.

“One Vision, One Identity, One Community.” That is the motto of the Asean.

But what is the Asean Community really?

To put it simply, the Asean Community has three pillars: Asean Political-Security Community (APSC), Asean Economic

Community (AEC) and Asean Socio-Cultural Community (ASCC).

Under the AEC, for example, all Asean member states are required to be in tariff compliance by 31 December 2015. While some Asean member states which are better developed have already complied the requirement, at the same time, we have to be mindful that some Asean member states such as Myanmar and Cambodia are still struggling.

Undeniably, there have been endless meetings taking place with key partners all over the region and beyond on the vision of an Asean Community.

But if we take a look at the current state of growth in the Asean region itself, it is clearly unbalanced.

So what does it mean by one community? How does it look like? What does it mean to be an Asean-nite? The vision seems to be too distant to imagine.

Although the Asean website

has been revamped and now looks more attractive, modern and interactive than before, the so-called Asean-nites are still low-educated, not only on the idea of an Asean Community, but also on Asean itself.

Awareness is critical, and that is exactly the major weakness of Asean.

To achieve that, first and foremost, the role of the governments of Asean is crucial. Leaders have responsibility to lead the way in the building of such a community.

To start this off, it is important to bear in mind that the discussion on Asean Community is not limited to just between the governments and the key actors. The idea has to be shared widely with the region's business community and most importantly, the ordinary people of Asean member states.

At the same time, it is also important to build the sense of belief and homeliness among Asean communities because no Asean-nites should feel unfamiliar in another Asean country.

Ultimately, the sense of commonality needs to be cultivated.

However, it is a big challenge because each Asean country treasures its own culture. To enable the process of integration, there is a need for the Asean member states to realise that the fate of their neighbours will naturally have an impact upon them.

But for any of this to work, there must be political will from within the Asean itself.

Asean celebrates its 47th anniversary this week, but there remain many issues it could not agree on, for example, the maritime dispute in the South China Sea.

As one of the five founding members of Asean,

Malaysia has an important role to play in the organisation.

However, compared to neighbouring countries, Malaysia seems to be less “aggressive” in such a role, nationally or regionally.

2015 will be an important year for Malaysia, as it will be taking the chair of Asean.

As rightly said by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak, in his keynote address at the National Colloquium on Malaysia’s chairmanship of Asean 2015 recently, “one Asean for all” is the goal that the Asean Community should aim for.

But, the idea of “one Asean for all” can only become a reality if Asean is willing to open up and engage with its community from all sectors. Most importantly, such integration has to assure that the welfare of its Asean-nites will be well taken cared of.

Otherwise, I am afraid, the association will continue to

be “people-disoriented”  
with its notorious image,  
No Action, Talk Only. –  
August 4, 2014.

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Ms Khoo, your talent to affect change for the better thru writing is seriously wasted in regards to this topic of "Asean community" ... there are just not enough proponents whether on a high level or grassroot level to make this work... by the way, when you say some Asean countries are struggling did you include malaysia as well? :) ... .... because my personal opinion is that in the next 4-5 years malaysia will be the least competitive ... i'm betting

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Aiyah.. what so important for Malaysia? Never mind 1 Asean, we can't even get 1 Malaysia.

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