

Navigating Turbulence: ASEAN's Leadership Challenges in the Human Rights Violation in Myanmar and South China Sea Dispute

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Abstract

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is one of the most rapidly growing regional organizations, significantly influencing the geopolitical landscape of Southeast Asia and beyond. Despite these successes, however, ASEAN currently faces serious challenges in maintaining its unity, solidarity, and cohesiveness. A critical issue is the divergence in views, attitudes, and policies of member countries on crucial political and security matters. This study explores the concept of leadership within the structure of regionalization in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The concept is shaped by structural capabilities derived from the region's resource production and manpower, with charisma playing a crucial role in leadership. Based on this concept, this study explores the leadership role in ASEAN's efforts to address current and upcoming issues, particularly about human rights abuses in Myanmar and South China Sea disputes. This study compares Indonesia's leadership within ASEAN to that of other member states using a qualitative comparative case study design. This method investigates how different elements affect the phenomenon that is being studied. A more nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between various variables, including leadership, domestic turmoil, and regional dynamics, can be obtained through the analysis of cases in real-life contexts. The study posits that ASEAN will not be able to uphold its integrity and accelerate the realization of a harmonious ASEAN society in the future without robust leadership. Unlike in

its early years, ASEAN today lacks a leader capable of mobilizing political resources to address and resolve collective issues within the organization.

Keywords: Leadership, ASEAN, Regionalization, Human Rights, South China Sea

Introduction

In 2023, Indonesia took a turn as chairman of ASEAN for the fourth time. As the founding country of ASEAN and the largest country among the other ASEAN member states, it is recognized that Indonesia has played a very significant role in building ASEAN as a regional organization that is as advanced and developing as it is today. The safe and stable domestic political conditions, strong leadership, and a conducive international political environment have provided ample opportunities for Indonesia to fully carry out its role in ASEAN. During the three previous chairmanships, Indonesia, together with other member countries, has succeeded in producing various great ideas that have become references in ASEAN cooperation in various fields (Kominfo, 2023). It is not surprising that for a long time, ASEAN has been seen as one of the most successful regional organizations in the world. The number of members and strategic partners continues to grow. The issues addressed cover traditional and 'new' issues, such as non-traditional security threats (Caballero-Anthony & Cook, 2013). Admittedly, it has been successful in many areas, but not in certain areas.

Indonesia hopes and strives hard in the era of its chairmanship in 2023 to be able to play an important role again in enhancing and maintaining cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity among ASEAN member countries. However, when Indonesia becomes the chair of ASEAN in 2023, the domestic political situation and conditions in Indonesia and other ASEAN member countries, as well as the international political environment, will be very different from the previous situations and conditions. Indonesia's domestic politics today are not as solid as in the previous era. Meanwhile, several other ASEAN member countries are also facing domestic political problems that are no less serious than what Indonesia is currently facing. Take the example of what has happened to Myanmar's domestic politics in recent years. Myanmar's political turmoil due to the military coup against the civilian regime led by Aung San Suu Kyi has impacted the solidity and cohesiveness of ASEAN (Paddock, 2022). This is marked by the appearance of direct 'criticism', 'sharp criticism', or 'appeals' from the leaders of the ASEAN member states themselves, actions that contradict or 'violate' the principles of the ASEAN Way (Ruggi, 2023). The impact is the strained relations of several ASEAN member countries with Myanmar, which is indicated by the existence of a 'boycott' or ban on the presence of Myanmar's current leader in several ASEAN high-level meetings.

The international political environment has also been, is, and continues to change from time to time, which causes the current situation and condition of the international political environment to be different from the previous times. In the last two or three decades, there has been a global geopolitical, geoeconomics, and geostrategic shift along

with its inherent impacts, which are significant for the region and the world. In the Southeast Asian region, for example, the emergence of China as an aggressive new world power has invited a strong response from Western powers, especially the United States (Kausikan, 2015).

This rivalry between China and Western countries, especially the US, has ultimately affected the political dynamics, stability, and security of the Asia Pacific region, including Southeast Asia. One of the impacts of the rivalry between China and the West is the weakening of cohesiveness and solidarity among ASEAN member countries. This is evident in the case of the South China Sea conflict, where ASEAN failed to implement the consensus principle because several countries need to agree with the attitudes and policies of most ASEAN members on the issue. Admittedly or not, the solidity, cohesiveness, and solidarity among ASEAN member countries have undergone quite severe erosion in recent years.

Many Southeast Asian countries face a massive test for their peace and security in the form of the South China Sea dispute, which might be one of the most complicated issues ASEAN has faced. Regretfully, ASEAN alone has little sway over how things will turn out in the South China Sea. ASEAN's history and the domestic views of its member states may hold it back from usefully contributing to resolving the dispute. In return, these disputes create distrust and malign intentions between member states, which leads to an emerging security dilemma to compel each state to arm itself against the possibility of aggression from the others (Collins, 2001). This intra-ASEAN security dilemma, in return, hinders a cohesive and united response to external security challenges.

Another serious challenge is human rights violations and crimes against humanity, such as the Rohingya and the suppression of democracy by the military junta in Myanmar in recent years. As is well known, for so long, there have been human rights violations and crimes against humanity of the Rohingya people in Myanmar. Discrimination and oppression against the Rohingyas were systematic and planned after Burma gained independence in 1948. This oppression and discrimination continues in the era of the military junta regime between 1962-2010. The junta further excludes the Rohingyas by issuing a 1982 Citizenship Law, which explicitly rejects the Rohingyas from Myanmar citizenship. Since then, the junta has repeatedly conducted military operations to eliminate the Rohingyas from the Rakhine region by carrying out arbitrary detention, torture, and even mass murder. Human rights violations and crimes against the humanity of the Rohingya have resulted in hundreds or thousands of victims dying and thousands more being forced to flee to ASEAN countries.

Indonesia's response to these critical challenges during its ASEAN chairmanship will have far-reaching implications for the region's future. Success in addressing geopolitical tensions will enhance ASEAN's relevance, resilience, and cohesion. Conversely, failure to effectively tackle these challenges could undermine ASEAN's unity, credibility, and influence on the global stage. In this context, Indonesia has long been said to be the 'natural born leader' within ASEAN (Roberts & Widyaningsih, 2015).

Southeast Asian governments had tremendous mistrust and anxiety toward Indonesia before the organization's founding. This mistrust was evident after Sukarno's *Konfrontasi* policy, which jeopardized the Federation of Malaysia's intended formation. As Indonesia propagandized attacks using slogans like 'Crush Malaysia', threats surfaced, and the conflict grew more intense. Indonesia did not begin a peaceful involvement in relations with Southeast Asia until Suharto's 'New Order' regime when it pledged that Indonesia's considerable influence would not be misused to threaten the region's peace. Thus, ASEAN can be considered to be ruled by structural capabilities that stem from the region's ability to produce resources and manpower, while charisma is a key component of leadership.

Derived from the theory of charismatic leadership, it is stated that the leader who possesses the unique capacity to influence followers profoundly often creates innovation and discovers social changes (Delatour et al., 1948). A charismatic leader has a clear, compelling vision for the future and can communicate this vision effectively. Their ability to articulate a desirable future state motivates and aligns followers toward common goals. In regards to Indonesia's leadership, the discussions about Indonesia's chairmanship of ASEAN in 2023 seem to be more focused on the efforts to restore the regional economy and its member countries rather than on highlighting a sphere of influence that the leader is capable of. This is reflected in the themes that emerged in the context of Indonesia's chairmanship in ASEAN, which generally relate to "ASEAN Connectivity, Solidarity, and Synergy in Regional Economic Recovery" (Kementerian Koordinator Bidang Perekonomian Republik Indonesia, 2022). Practitioners, researchers, academics, and the public rarely discuss or examine specifically the importance of charismatic leadership in bringing ASEAN forward. This aspect is crucial not only to realize ASEAN's vision in the economic, social, political, and security fields but also to maintain the existence and integrity of ASEAN as a regional organization. Therefore, this research aims to fill the gap in which variable is essential in developing the virtue of ASEAN's leadership in the future, especially in the effort to maintain cohesiveness and solidarity in the middle of dynamics of domestic and international politics.

Literature Review

ASEAN: The Success Story of Regionalization

ASEAN has shown much progress in various areas of cooperation. Viewed from the aspect of economic cooperation, for example, until now, ASEAN as a single entity has managed to improve its status to become the sixth-largest economy in the world with a value of 2.555 trillion US dollars and also as the largest market in the world (Shofa, 2023a). In addition, ASEAN has also successfully increased its status as the fourth largest trading bloc in the world after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), European Union (EU), and *Bienvenidos al Mercado Común del Sur* (MERCOSUR), with a value of 2.7 trillion US dollars (Lim, 2020).

In the field of politics and security, ASEAN has also successfully resolved various cases peacefully, both relating to the interests of ASEAN member countries and the interests of the international community (Nesadurai, 2009). For example, ASEAN and its strategic partners succeeded in resolving the prolonged Cambodia conflict in the early 1990s, the Thailand and Cambodian conflicts over the Preah Vihear temple, the Indonesia-Malaysia Conflict on Sipadan and Ligitan islands, the Malaysian-Filipino Conflict over Sabah (Nair, 2021).

In addition, ASEAN has also succeeded in agreeing on various agreements and cooperation schemes that have become the foundation for ASEAN to move forward, such as the Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality (ZOPFAN), Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), Bali Concord I, II, and III, and various other important agreements and treaties (Southgate, 2021). Two other substantial and crucial achievements that ASEAN has achieved in the past two decades, which are often considered indicators of the success of these regional organizations, are, first, the success of ASEAN in agreeing on the ASEAN Charter at the 13th ASEAN Summit in Singapore, November 2007, which came into force since 15 December 2008. The ASEAN Charter is critical and a firm foundation for achieving the ASEAN Community by providing legal status and institutional framework for ASEAN. It also codifies ASEAN norms, rules, and values, sets clear targets for ASEAN, and presents accountability and compliance (Oratmangun, 2009). With the entry into force of the ASEAN Charter, ASEAN will henceforth operate under a new legal framework and establish a new organization to boost its community-building process.

Second is the success of ASEAN in establishing the three ASEAN pillars in 2015, namely the ASEAN Political and Security Community (APSC), the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), and the ASEAN Social and Cultural Community (ASCC). The success of ASEAN in establishing the three ASEAN pillars is a very strategic step in the efforts of these regional organizations to realize the integration of the nations of ASEAN as a whole and robust (Tomotaka, 2001). ASEAN's success in establishing these three pillars further clarifies and reinforces the direction, goals, and mechanisms that ASEAN wants to achieve and realize in the future, especially efforts to strengthen the integration of ASEAN countries (Wicaksono, 2007).

Cooperation in the field of economy and trade, for example, until now, ASEAN as a single entity has managed to improve its status to become the sixth-largest economy in the world with a value of 2.555 trillion US dollars and also as the largest market in the world. In addition, ASEAN has also successfully increased its status as the fourth largest trading bloc in the world after NAFTA, EU, and MERCOSUR, with a value of 2.7 trillion US dollars (World Economics, 2023). Over the past decade, intra-ASEAN trade increased from \$500 billion in 2010 to \$712 billion in 2021, making up about 21% of the region's total trade. With more than \$3 trillion of total trade, ASEAN has become the fourth-largest trader in the world, behind only the European Union, China, and the United States (Shofa, 2023b). Similarly, ASEAN's service trade also grew by 70%, from \$441 billion in 2010 to \$637 billion in 2020 (Hoi, 2022).

Hindered Progress towards Deeper Integration

Understanding the fundamentals of ASEAN leadership as a concept is essential to identifying Indonesia's leadership role in the current dynamics of the organization. Furthermore, this understanding highlights Indonesia's ability to navigate complex regional issues, mediate conflicts, and drive forward key initiatives such as the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), thereby reinforcing its position as a pivotal player in shaping the future of Southeast Asia.

Rattanasevee (2014) has described how ASEAN leadership is represented by the presidency or chairmanship, which is alternated annually in alphabetical order and has the power to affect the organization's decision-making process. Furthermore, the only way to measure leadership logically is not through that formal process but rather through informal forms of leadership that have the power to compel other actors. This approach emphasizes the significance of soft power, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to navigate complex social dynamics to achieve consensus and drive collective action. Informal leadership often manifests in building trust, fostering collaboration, and creating a shared vision that resonates with others, thereby achieving meaningful and sustainable outcomes that formal authority alone may not accomplish.

Nevertheless, ASEAN is also currently facing a lack of leadership at the head-of-state level, which poses significant challenges to its ability to effectively address regional issues and advance its collective agenda. This leadership vacuum hampers the organization's capacity to respond to geopolitical tensions, economic uncertainties, and transnational challenges. As a result, ASEAN's cohesion and effectiveness are at risk, making it crucial for member states to bolster their commitment to shared goals and for emerging leaders to step up and guide the region toward greater integration and stability (Ku, 2002). This is not to mention several challenges, such as the hardening of differences in views and attitudes as well as policies of each member country towards crucial issues. In sum, ASEAN member countries are still divided and have differences in their political views and attitudes as well as policies in their effort to resolve the South China Sea conflict.

These differences are rooted in the differences in the system, structure, economic, and political interests of each ASEAN member country itself. These differences have colored the dynamics of development within the ASEAN itself, particularly in terms of efforts to maintain cohesiveness and strong cooperation in resolving issues related to political and security conflicts in the region, which involve ASEAN member countries directly or indirectly. In the future, if such matters are left unchecked and not handled properly, it has the potential to weaken the cohesiveness among ASEAN member countries, which in turn, can result in the low solidity or 'breakup' of ASEAN as a regional organization of Southeast Asia.

One of the problems that will become a serious challenge for Indonesia and ASEAN in the future is that there are still (or potential to occur) disputes and conflicts between ASEAN member countries, mainly related to territorial disputes. The fact is that almost

all ASEAN member countries still have disputes or conflicts or have the potential to conflict with each other. The examples are the disputes between Indonesia-Malaysia regarding the Ambalat area, Singapore - Malaysia regarding Batu Puteh Island, Malaysia - the Philippines regarding Sabah, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Brunei regarding areas in the South China Sea, Thailand - Cambodia regarding the Preah Vihear Temple, Thailand - Malaysia regarding the Territory Gulf of Thailand, and conflicts between Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and China over the management of the Mekong River.

It must be admitted that in several cases, ASEAN has been able to minimize interstate conflict or disputes because of an adherence to the principles of consensus, non-interference, and the peaceful resolution of disputes. However, ASEAN is only limited to being able to keep these conflicts under a pillow (stopping conflicts) but has not been able to resolve existing conflicts (conflict resolution) completely. Thus, these conflicts or disputes are actually like 'fire in the husk', still having the potential to 'explode' again at one time, for example, the territorial dispute between Malaysia and Indonesia regarding Ambalat and the territorial dispute between Malaysia and the Philippines regarding Sabah. As is known, the two conflicts have not been successfully resolved entirely, so they still have the potential to 'explode' and escalate into armed conflict. Alternatively, at least the conflict has the potential to trigger an increase in enmity (feeling of being actively opposed or hostile to someone or something) between the countries involved in the conflict. This increase in enmity can further increase the operation of the security dilemma, which triggers an arms race. If this phenomenon occurs, it will certainly erode cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity among the ASEAN member countries.

Conflicts or disputes between ASEAN member countries, as mentioned, will be a tough challenge for the ASEAN chair, considering several things. First, the conflict involves a sensitive matter, namely the issue of a country's territorial sovereignty, which takes work to resolve. Solving these problems requires a long time, effort, and thought as well as enormous resources and requires figures/leaders who have strong leadership (have high diplomacy and management and conflict resolution skills, pay attention to existing conflicts, have credibility, and are respected and have resources of intense political, economic support both domestically and internationally) by conflicting countries. Meanwhile, it is difficult to deny that almost all ASEAN member countries, including Indonesia, currently do not have leaders who meet the mentioned criteria. Second, Indonesia is directly involved in border disputes with other ASEAN member countries, especially with Malaysia. Under such circumstances, it is difficult for Indonesia, as chair of ASEAN, to objectively resolve conflicts between other ASEAN member countries because it is in a position of conflict with other member countries. Considering that the source of the conflict is directly related to the fundamental national interests of each country, it is inevitable that every country, including Indonesia, will prioritize its national interests when facing such a problem. Third, ASEAN's formal mechanism is not sufficiently accommodative and capable of resolving territorial conflicts between its member countries. This is proven by the protractedness or even the

failure of ASEAN to resolve conflicts or territorial disputes between fellow members, for example, the conflict between Indonesia - Malaysia regarding Sipadan Ligitan (which was later resolved through an international mechanism, an international tribunal), the conflict between Indonesia and Malaysia regarding Ambalat, and the conflict between Malaysia and the Philippines regarding Sabah, which has not yet been resolved.

Domestic Political Dynamics of ASEAN Member Countries

Another serious challenge that ASEAN will face in efforts to strengthen and increase cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity is the existence of domestic political instability in several ASEAN member countries. As is known, almost all ASEAN member countries are experiencing domestic political stability problems, from the election process considered dishonest and unfair, changes in leaders that are not normal, conflicts between political forces in their respective countries, and political coups.

Actions of human rights violations and crimes against humanity of the Rohingya and the suppression of democracy by the military junta in Myanmar in recent years are perfect examples of the challenges in question. There have been human rights violations and crimes against humanity of the Rohingya people in Myanmar. Discrimination and oppression against the Rohingyas were systematic and planned after Burma gained independence in 1948. This oppression and discrimination continued in the era of the Military Junta Regime between 1962-2010. The Junta further excluded the Rohingyas by issuing a 1982 Citizenship Law that explicitly rejected the Rohingyas from Myanmar citizenship. Since then, the Junta has repeatedly conducted military operations to eliminate the Rohingyas from the Rakhine region by carrying out arbitrary detention, torture, and even mass murder. Human rights violations and crimes against humanity of the Rohingya have resulted in hundreds or thousands of victims dying and thousands more being forced to flee to ASEAN countries (Wicaksono, 2021).

In Indonesia, the issue also sparks various protests and criticisms against Myanmar. Activists and human rights institutions urge the Indonesian government, as a founder of ASEAN, to take immediate action to address the problem by nudging the Myanmar government towards a more equitable response. In response to the problem, President Indonesia at that time, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), put forward his so-called 'constructive' and 'dialogical' approach instead of confrontation (Purba, 2021).

SBY stressed that the Indonesian government had not remained silent on the case and would try to help resolve it through several steps. First, Indonesia would discuss this problem multilaterally and regionally through the United Nations (UN) and ASEAN to achieve a feasible solution. Second, Indonesia proposed that Myanmar invite UN agencies, foreign diplomats, and members of the Islamic Cooperation Organization to see the actual conditions to achieve a balanced view of the situation there. Here, SBY had made Indonesia's position clear. The issue of human rights violations against the Rohingyas was to be seen as a domestic affair of Myanmar. However, Indonesia also highlighted that the root of the problem lay in the undemocratic political system, which

emphasized its importance. He stressed the goal to continue to encourage Myanmar to start developing a democratic system by holding elections that were inclusive, credible, involving all parties, transparent, and by the norms and rules of a democratic election (Kinley & Nolan, 2008).

Although debatable, Indonesia's attitude and policy towards human rights violations of the Rohingyas has yet to show its effectiveness in influencing Myanmar to act more equitably and wisely (Kegley, 2007). The flow of Rohingya refugees has caused quite serious social and economic problems for several ASEAN member states. So, the influx of asylum seekers to Myanmar's neighboring countries quickly ignited reactions from the ASEAN member states. However, due to the different interests of each, the attitudes, views, and policies of ASEAN member countries towards the violations of human rights of the Rohingya people in Myanmar are also different. For example, Thailand, Singapore, Laos, Cambodia, and Brunei Darussalam tend to be reluctant to address the refugee issue. Meanwhile, Malaysia and Indonesia are more responsive and accommodative towards the flow of Rohingya refugees. Indonesia has rescued hundreds of refugees (men, women, and children) from the ships which carried them.

Recently, the political situation in Myanmar has worsened again with the occurrence of a political coup by the Military Junta led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. As is known, after the Myanmar military overthrew the civilian government in a coup and took power on 1 February 2021, national protests and a campaign of mass civil disobedience against the military junta continued. The military retaliated with a crackdown on the protesters. The rise of the military junta to power in Myanmar has exacerbated human rights violations in the country. The victims are not only the Rohingya, as is done by the previous regime, but also democracy activists in the country. Dozens or even hundreds of people are killed or injured, and thousands of people are arrested and jailed because they are considered against this military junta regime (Chap, 2023).

Efforts by the leaders of ASEAN countries to stop human rights violations in Myanmar by implementing the five points of consensus (5PC) have also failed (Person, 2022). Instead of Myanmar complying with the agreement, which contains dialogue among all parties, the appointment of a special envoy, humanitarian assistance by ASEAN, and the special envoy's visit to Myanmar to meet with all parties, the country escalated its acts of violence against the Rohingya ethnic group (Pearson, 2022). The failure of ASEAN leaders to convince and force the Myanmar military junta government to comply with the five concession points shows the absence of strong leadership in ASEAN countries. This also means that ASEAN still needs to be stronger and able to help resolve political and security issues in each ASEAN member country. According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Indonesia, Retno Marsudi, Myanmar's military government is responsible for the lack of progress on a peace plan agreed upon with ASEAN. Mrs Retno Marsudi states, "The criticisms should not be aimed at ASEAN. They should be aimed at the junta." (Strangio, 2022).

Methodology

This research is expected to contribute to the results of a new (data and knowledge) analysis of ASEAN's challenges and opportunities in increasing and maintaining cohesiveness and solidarity among ASEAN member countries amid geoeconomic, geopolitical, and geostrategic changes/shifts in the world today. The results of this research are not only important and helpful for the interests of the academic world (science development). Still, they will also be helpful in the ASEAN policymaking process, especially by Indonesia as the chairman of ASEAN in 2023. By knowing in detail and scientifically the challenges and opportunities faced, Indonesia, as chairman of ASEAN, can play a better role in maintaining and increasing future cohesiveness and solidarity among ASEAN member countries.

Due to the high sensitivity of matters relating to political and security issues, solving the problem is insufficient through the formal legal procedures and mechanisms of the ASEAN framework alone. Given the principle of consensus in policymaking in ASEAN, such differences among ASEAN member countries have caused difficulties in realizing the principle of ASEAN centrality in the effort to solve the problem. In such a context, the leadership aspect can play an essential role in solving the problems facing ASEAN in the field of politics and security. There are many cases where strong leadership can solve various problems faced by ASEAN, including political and security issues. The problem is, for the last decade now, ASEAN, admit it or not, has been facing a serious leadership crisis. There is no strong leader in ASEAN who is supported by domestic people and regional and international communities, so he/she can mobilize all political resources to realize the ASEAN cooperation programs.

Unfortunately, little attention has been given to this leadership's role in forming and developing ASEAN now and in the future, both by observers and practitioners in the field of foreign policy and diplomacy. Some studies are generally more focused on why, what the purpose is, how the cooperation is formed and implemented, what the constraints and opportunities are, and what the outcomes of the cooperation in various fields that have been undertaken by ASEAN are. There have been several studies concerning the role of leadership in ASEAN, although generally, it is more focused on the role of individual leadership of a country in ASEAN, for example, the role of Indonesia in ASEAN.

Two interrelated questions want to be answered in this research. First, what are the critical areas for enhancing and maintaining cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity among ASEAN member countries in the future? Second, what leadership models can be used to maintain ASEAN centrality?

This research employs a qualitative comparative case study design, focusing on Indonesia's leadership towards ASEAN compared to other ASEAN member states. This approach enables the exploration of the interplay between various factors and their influence on the phenomenon under study (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999). By examining cases

in real-life settings, the researcher can gain a nuanced understanding of the intricate relationships between different variables, such as leadership and domestic turbulence, as well as regional dynamics. This approach is also flexible and adaptable to various research questions and settings. The researcher can tailor their approach to suit the specific objectives of his/her research, selecting cases that offer rich insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Thematic analysis will identify recurring patterns and themes from the qualitative data. The findings will be interpreted in conjunction with qualitative results to provide a comprehensive understanding of leadership challenges in ASEAN.

Indonesia is chosen as the primary case compared to other ASEAN member states. With its democratic system and diverse socio-cultural context, it offers a rich terrain for studying leadership dynamics. Understanding how Indonesia's leadership differs from or aligns with other ASEAN countries can shed light on broader trends in governance, democratization, and political development within the region. Moreover, Indonesia is the largest country in Southeast Asia, both in terms of population and economy. Comparing Indonesia's leadership style, strategies, and influence with other ASEAN member states can provide insights into power dynamics and regional governance structures. Indonesia's position within ASEAN also shapes its role in global affairs. As a member of G20 and other international forums, Indonesia's leadership within ASEAN can amplify its voice on global issues such as climate change, sustainable development, and geopolitical dynamics. Analyzing Indonesia's leadership compared to other ASEAN countries helps contextualize its global engagement, diplomatic priorities, and contributions to shaping global governance structures.

The researcher gathers the data through a triangulation method, which involves using multiple data sources or methods to corroborate findings and enhance the credibility and validity of the research. By combining different data sources, the researcher can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study and mitigate the limitations of any single method. This is done by conducting interviews with the researchers and practitioners to explore their experiences, perspectives, and opinions. This research also involves a document analysis of the official documents, media reports, and literature review.

While this design offers valuable insights into complex phenomena, it also has several limitations that researchers should consider. The findings are context-specific and may not be easily transferable to other settings or populations. Other than that, it typically involves small, purposively selected samples, which may raise questions about the representativeness of the findings. Despite the limitations, the researcher believes that this research offers a valuable approach to exploring complex phenomena in-depth, especially in the context of regionalization.

The researcher uses an analytical approach such as grounded theory and cross-case comparison to compare findings within and between cases to uncover insights into the factors shaping the phenomenon under investigation. The next stage is interpreting the

findings of qualitative and comparative analysis in relation to the research objectives. This is done by investigating the leadership trend of ASEAN member states. Overall, the research design serves as a roadmap for researchers, guiding the systematic and rigorous investigation of the research question in qualitative research.

This research argues that leadership (individual and/or state) plays a vital role in the process of establishment and also the development of ASEAN as a regional organization to the stage that has been achieved now. The presence of strong leaders in ASEAN, leaders that can mobilize domestic and international political resources to support their position and power, finally play an essential role in maintaining and strengthening cohesiveness among ASEAN member countries, which in turn will not only strengthen the existence of the regional organization but will also help drive its progress. Conversely, strong and legitimate leadership will strengthen the cohesiveness of ASEAN member countries and ultimately make regional organizations cohesive and robust in the future.

Analysis

Historical Perspective of ASEAN Leadership

In a simple definition, leadership in this context can be understood as a capacity to translate vision into reality. Leadership is a process of social influence that maximizes the efforts of others toward achieving a goal (Yukl, 2012). Leadership is the process of influencing or exemplifying by leaders to followers to achieve organizational goals.

After a long process, ASEAN was officially established on August 8, 1967, through what came to be known as the Bangkok Declaration. The establishment of ASEAN as a regional organization is based on Southeast Asian nations' awareness of the need for solidarity and cooperation between them. Through a shared attitude and action, it is hoped that peace, progress, and prosperity will be created in the Southeast Asian region.

The success of five countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore, in establishing ASEAN is an important achievement in regional politics. So far, five figures are considered to have contributed significantly to the establishment of ASEAN, namely: Indonesian Foreign Minister - H. Adam Malik, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines - Narciso Ramos, Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia - Tun Abdul Razak, Thai Foreign Minister - Thanat Khoman, and Singapore Foreign Minister - S. Rajaratnam.

An analysis of to what extent leadership plays a role in the formation and development of ASEAN should be seen, who holds the reins of power, and who plays the main role in the political system at the national level of each of the ASEAN founding countries. This argument is based on the fact that the five figures who have been regarded as the main figures in the success of the formation of ASEAN as mentioned. They are generally members of the cabinet or ministerial level, whose role is mainly to

act as the executor of the tasks of the national leaders of each country. Theoretically, whatever they do in the long process of establishing ASEAN is a form of implementation of duties, orders, directives, or policies given by their respective supreme leaders. The five figures mentioned can only be able to carry out their duties or do something with the instructions and approval of their leaders, including in the context of ASEAN formation.

Thus, to see the relationship between leadership and the formation of ASEAN, it is necessary to see who is in the top position of the power structure (the top leader) in the five founding countries of ASEAN at that time. As is well known, at the time of the ASEAN establishment, Indonesia was led by President Suharto, Malaysia was led by Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, the Philippines was headed by President Ferdinand Marcos, Thailand was led by General Minister Thanom Kittikachorn (with support of King of Thailand Bhumibol Adulyadej), and Prime Minister Singapore Lee Kuan Yew.

Regardless of whether the five leaders of the ASEAN founding countries obtained and then exercised their respective powers through a democratic process or not, it is difficult to deny that the five leaders are strong leaders both in the context of domestic leadership and international and regional leadership. The five leaders of the ASEAN founding countries are leaders who, at that time, received firm support from their respective countries and large and powerful countries outside the Southeast Asia region, especially from Western countries. In addition, the five leaders of the founding countries of ASEAN are also known as leaders with great leadership characteristics: charismatic, firm, and courageous in acting and taking policies and can turn an idea or vision into a reality.

Take, for example, the era of President Suharto's leadership in Indonesia, President Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, and Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore. Although the three leaders were later considered by some of their respective domestic communities and also some of the international community as authoritarian and undemocratic leaders, along with various other negative labels (such as corruption, collusion, and nepotism), it is difficult to deny that the three of them are strong leaders and have excellent lead character. At that time, all three leaders had strong political support at home and abroad. President Suharto, for example, was fully supported by Golkar with its three components (ABRI, Bureaucracy, and Golongan Karya); Malaysian leaders were supported by UMNO Dominant Party; Marcos was supported by the Nacionalista Party Party (1965-1978), which later turned into the Kilusang Bagong Lipunan Party (1978-1986) had a dominant voice in parliament since 1965-1986, and most importantly Marcos was also supported by the Military. Lee Kuan Yew was supported by The People's Action Party (PAP), which has always been a Dominant Party in Singapore politics, while Thailand has remained under the control of King Raja Bhumibol Adulyadej who has strong roots in Thai society and still has a powerful influence in the Thai political system even though formal leaders, often alternately. As a result, all leaders of these five ASEAN member countries have a strong capacity and

capability to lead their respective countries, act decisively, have a clear vision, and implement the programs or policies they make.

At the international level, they also get strong support, especially from Western powers such as the United States, Western European countries, Australia, Canada, and Japan. These countries' support for ASEAN member countries is a part of their strategies to embrace ASEAN countries to counteract the expansion of Communist influence in the region at that time (Cold War era). In other words, the three figures are not only able to control and mobilize sources of domestic and foreign political power in such a way as to strengthen and maintain their power to continue to be in power for a long time but also to support each of their policies, including their respective foreign policies, such as the establishment of ASEAN policies. Thus, it is difficult to imagine that the process of forming ASEAN at that time would run smoothly and successfully without the critical role played by the leaders of the founding countries.

It must be understood that the establishment of the ASEAN is a tangible form of the efforts of regional countries, especially Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, to maintain and create stability in the region, which at that time was experiencing serious threats inter-state conflict as well as foreign power intervention as a result of the rivalry of super-power countries in the Cold War. The fact is that almost all of the ASEAN founding countries conflicted with each other at that time. Indonesia conflicted with Malaysia due to the confrontation policies carried out by President Soekarno toward Malaysia, whereas Malaysia also conflicted with the Philippines regarding the Sabah dispute and with Thailand regarding southern Thailand.

Thus, the initial idea to form ASEAN cannot be separated from the efforts of the leaders of the ASEAN founding countries to stop the conflict they were facing at that time. This argument becomes very strong and relevant, at least in the case of Indonesia's involvement and enthusiasm in the formation of ASEAN. In this context, the formation of ASEAN is inseparable from Soeharto's role, which tends to prioritize good neighboring foreign policy. In the era of Suharto's leadership (New Order), Indonesia sought to create an image as a non-aggressive country, as was done in the era of President Soekarno (Old Order). As is known, the Soekarno era in Indonesia launched a confrontation policy with Malaysia. However, after successfully taking control of Soekarno in 1967, President Suharto made a significant policy reform by stopping confrontation with Malaysia (Maksum & Bustami, 2014).

Suharto decided to stop the confrontation with Malaysia because he considered the policy irrelevant and not in the direction and interests of Indonesian foreign policy, which began to shift from close to the East block to closer to the Western bloc (Maksum & Bustami, 2014). Indonesia's decision to stop confrontation with Malaysia, which in this case was made by President Suharto, was an initial action that became the basis of Indonesia's involvement in forming ASEAN. Furthermore, Suharto wanted national economic development by supporting regional cooperation and wanting a stable and

peaceful region without more conflicts and wars. This underlies Indonesia's initiative to form the Southeast Asian region organization, ASEAN. Even then, President Suharto explicitly placed ASEAN as a top priority in Indonesian foreign policy. ASEAN countries are the deepest concentric circle in implementing Indonesian foreign policy.

So, for Indonesia at that time, the establishment of ASEAN was not only an institution or tool for the cessation of conflict between countries in the region but was also expected to be a place or institution to maintain and strengthen regional stability and security and also to develop cooperation in various sectors and fields for the peace and prosperity of all nations in the region. Although there may be a slight difference in nuances and priority levels, however the same ideas and reasons also seem to be in the minds of leaders of other ASEAN founder countries, namely Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, Malaysian Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, Prime Minister Large General Thanom Kittikachorn and Thai King Bhumibol Adulyadej, and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. This can be seen from the enthusiasm of the leaders of the four countries to participate in the successful formation of the ASEAN from the beginning to the issuance of the Bangkok Declaration in 1967.

However, a further question needs to be asked: Is there a relationship or connection between the rapid progress achieved by ASEAN in the last five decades and the presence of strong leadership in ASEAN member countries? It is difficult to argue that the success of advancing ASEAN, as mentioned, is without the support of strong leadership from each ASEAN member country, especially the main ones, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore.

The fact is that almost all of the progress is achieved in the era of the strong leaders in the five countries, namely President Suharto, Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman, President Ferdinand Marcos, King of Thailand Bhumibol Adulyadej, and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. With the presence of domestic political support for such strong leaders, it is understandable that these leaders can implement their foreign policies and ideas more effectively, including in the context of ASEAN development. In other words, their leadership can be easily implemented in policy without significant challenges and obstacles in the country, including those relating to foreign policy regarding ASEAN.

It is true that throughout ASEAN history, some of the leaders of ASEAN member countries have been replaced by other leaders. Marcos led up until 1986, Lee Kuan Yew until 1990, Suharto until 1998, Tun Abdul Rahman, replaced by Tun Abdul Razak and replaced by Hussien Onn, and then Mahathir Mohamad. Some leaders, like President Suharto, Marcos, Lee Kuan Yew, and the King of Thailand, continue to lead for a long time. Nevertheless, some senior leaders in these ASEAN countries also exist, such as the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Abdul Rahman, whom Tun Abdul Razak replaced, then succeeded by Hussien Onn, and then replaced by Mahathir Mohamad.

However, it is important to note that the change of leader does not apply to all leaders and does not take place simultaneously. In addition, the leaders' changes do not

necessarily erase the role and influence of the previous leaders, including in their foreign policy toward ASEAN. In other words, the change of leader does not mean closing the possibility that the country's foreign policy will change completely from what has been determined by its predecessor. In many cases, there are even some new leaders who consistently continue the leadership of their predecessors.

This happens in Malaysia and Singapore. Although Tun Abdul Rahman had already taken power in 1970, his leadership continued with his successor Tun Abdul Razak, Datuk Hussien Onn, and later Mahathir Mohamad. Even in many ways, especially in the context of their attention and policy towards ASEAN, the three successors to Tun Abdul Rahman had far better leadership, especially in the era of Mahathir Mohamad. This explains why Malaysia, for example, can still play a significant role in the next period in determining the direction of development of ASEAN even though the leader of its founding figure has come down from power.

Almost the same phenomenon happened in Singapore. When Lee Kuan Yew stepped down from power in 1990, his successor, Goh Chok Tong and later Lee Hsien Loon, consistently carried out the leadership style of his predecessor. Even in some cases, Lee Kuan Yew's successor, Goh Chok Tong, succeeded in developing more creative policies than his predecessor. This is why Singapore can continue to play an important role in promoting and developing ASEAN. Nevertheless, it must also be recognized that the leadership qualities of Lee Kuan Yew's two successors are less strong than their predecessors.

In this context, it can be understood that many ideas and agreements that have now become icons of ASEAN, such as agreements and cooperation in the economic, social, cultural, political, and security fields, are put in place in the era of post-founding father leadership. This context includes the idea of forming three ASEAN pillars, namely the ASEAN Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community, which are currently the central pillars of ASEAN.

Indonesia has indeed shown good leadership and had a strong vision and political will to help develop ASEAN, namely Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY), who rose to become President of Indonesia for two periods (2004-2009 and 2009-2014). During SBY's presidency, Indonesia's foreign policy reflects the values of harmony and collaboration. Indonesia bases its foreign policy priorities on 'Geographic Proximity', with the Asia Pacific area in the final circle, including ASEAN, East Asia in the second, and Indonesia as the inner circle (Anwar, 2013). The 'free and active policy' and 'Million Friends, Zero Enemies' tenets of SBY, which discourage any assertive stance towards the international community, serve as the foundation for relations with these states.

Unfortunately, SBY's rise as a leader with relatively good leadership at the regional level is not matched by the emergence of leadership in the same class or exceeded in other ASEAN countries. In Malaysia, PM Mohd Najib bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak appears, who does not show strong leadership, and even later proves to be problematic, as

evidenced by his involvement in the 1MDB scandal, which leads to his conviction on charges of corruption and money laundering (Beech, 2020).

Thailand's leaders change with generally very short tenure, less than four years, except General Prem Tinsulanonda (1980-1988) and Thaksin Shinawatra (2001-2006 and 2006-2006) (McCargo & Pathmanand, 2004). These frequent leadership changes have often resulted in inconsistent policies and disrupted progress on long-term national initiatives, further complicating Thailand's role within ASEAN and its ability to provide steady regional leadership.

Many Southeast Asian countries face a huge test for their peace and security in the form of the South China Sea dispute, which might be one of the most complicated issues ASEAN has faced. Regretfully, ASEAN alone has little sway over how things will turn out in the South China Sea (Weatherbee, 2009). The challenge is more severe because the orientation, vision, and interests of several ASEAN countries' leaders often differ in placing ASEAN in their foreign policy. Some leaders see their national interests as more important than ASEAN, for example, in the case of Cambodia on the issue of the South China Sea. This has become increasingly difficult due to the tendency of ASEAN countries to stick to the principles of ASEAN, the ASEAN way. As is known, Cambodia is one of the countries with different attitudes and positions from other member countries on the issue of the South China Sea. The problem is that different Cambodian attitudes have hampered the strengthening of ASEAN centrality, given the consensus principle in decision-making in ASEAN.

Furthermore, ASEAN member countries have different attitudes and policies regarding the South China Sea issue (Simões, 2022). The differences in attitudes and policies are mainly due to differences in perception, which ultimately gave rise to different interests among the leaders of ASEAN member countries regarding the issue of the South China Sea conflict. Several countries, such as Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, for example, tend to be passive and even pro-China in responding to this issue.

These three countries, especially Cambodia, 'reject' the involvement of ASEAN as a regional organization in resolving the conflict. During the ASEAN foreign ministers meeting in 2016, Prak Sokhon, the foreign minister of Cambodia, declined to make a statement on the dispute in the South China Sea. He even suggested that the resolution of the conflict in the South China Sea be handed over directly to each country involved in the conflict (Mogato, Martina, & Blanchard, 2016). Meanwhile, Thongloun Sisoulith, the prime minister of Laos, stated in Ulaanbaatar on 14 July 2016 that Laos concurs with China's position over the South China Sea arbitration dispute (Xinhua, 2016). Under Indonesia's leadership in 2023, ASEAN attempts to quicken the negotiation process again, but with Laos in the leadership line this year, it might stagnate again. Resuming talks over conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea would be hindered by Laos' debt to China. This country's attitude is closely related to its economic interests,

which have depended on China. Coincidence, these three countries are non-claimant states and are not directly involved in the South China Sea conflict.

On the other hand, as the claimant states, countries such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam tend to be more active and even confrontational in resolving the conflict by urging China to comply with international law. Gilberto Teodoro, the defense minister of the Philippines, recently refuted a Chinese assertion that the two nations have struck a settlement about escalating maritime disputes (Strangio, 2024). In addition, Vietnamese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Pham Thu Hang has said that recent operations in the South China Sea by a Chinese research ship and the Philippine Coast Guard violated sovereign rights (Nguyen & Guarascio, 2023).

Apart from that, in terms of political security interests, these countries tend to be closer to the United States and its allies to ward off security threats from China in the South China Sea. Meanwhile, Indonesia, as a Non-claimant, has initially tended to be more neutral and recently began to show an 'anti-China' attitude as well after China's claims to the area around the North Natuna Sea and several incidents between Chinese Patrol Boats and Indonesian Warships.

Take the case of the process of formulating the concept and enforcing the Code of Conduct for the South China Sea conflict made by ASEAN. To resolve this issue, for example, most ASEAN member countries want a typical attitude and view in agreeing on the implementation of the Code of Conduct (CoC). However, the process is very long and difficult to implement because several countries, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar, seem reluctant to agree on the CoC concept. So, until now, the CoC process has only reached the first reading agreement by the 10 ASEAN member countries; it has yet to be fully agreed to be implemented (Darmawan, 2021). The difference in attitudes and policies in the CoC case shows that ASEAN still needs to implement one of its principles, namely consensus-based policymaking. Moreover, this, at the same time, proves that there has been a weakening of cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity among ASEAN member countries.

The case of the formation of the Indo-Pacific and the formation of AUKUS is another clear example that hurts cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity between ASEAN member countries. As is known, ASEAN member countries have different attitudes and enthusiasm towards the presence of the Indo-Pacific and the formation of AUKUS (Parameswaran, 2023). Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, and Vietnam appear more responsive and active in establishing the Indo-Pacific Cooperation. These ASEAN member countries are also relatively able to accept the formation of the AUKUS defense facts by America, Britain, and Australia. On the other hand, Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar are quite relatable in responding to and participating in Indo-Pacific Cooperation and rejecting the presence of AUKUS (Parameswaran, 2023).

The phenomenon mentioned emphasizes the importance of paying attention to two main things in understanding the character of security relations between ASEAN

member countries. First, given the inter-governmental nature of cooperation, they tend to be hostage to the national foreign policies of their respective members. This implies that their purpose, decisions, and actions reflect their members' consensus (Acharya, 2003). This consensus takes concrete form in the normative framework underpinning security cooperation, the agenda, and the resources and capabilities their members have invested (Hoadley & Ruland, 2016). Second, there is a close relationship between the arrangement of security cooperation in ASEAN and the relations of its member countries with the significant power countries. The relationship between the ASEAN member countries will influence the shape of the development and dynamics as well as the achievements of the security cooperation in ASEAN. For example, even though all ASEAN member countries are party to security regimes, at the same time, they also have an interest in maintaining good relations with certain major power countries for security and defense purposes, regardless of whether these major power countries are part or not from the existing security regime (Tarling, 2001). This kind of attitude has the potential to occur, especially if the major power countries in question have hegemonic powers to offer guarantees of extensive security cooperation to ASEAN member countries or vice versa (Buzan, 1991). ASEAN member countries themselves see the importance of cooperation in security with other countries. Major power may be used for various domestic, regional, and international political and security reasons. In such a case, the significance of the existing security cooperation arrangement may be significantly reduced (Hoadley & Ruland, 2006).

Paving the Way towards A Good Leadership

It is true and must be recognized that in the post-leadership era of the founders of ASEAN, the following leaders have also succeeded in recording various achievements for the development of ASEAN. However, the critical view of seeing what has been achieved by the ASEAN countries' leaders after the ASEAN founding is still not significant enough. Even the achievement cannot be said to be a success without seeing the extent to which all agreements, treaties, and various forms of schemes and mechanisms of cooperation can be implemented in the real-life community of the ASEAN member states. Now, most of the various norms, regimes, or agreements have yet to be effectively implemented by each ASEAN country. This shows that leadership in ASEAN member countries after strong ASEAN figures, as mentioned earlier, is still weak. ASEAN countries have not been able to produce leaders who have strong leadership qualities at the domestic and Southeast Asian levels.

In the future, it is expected that ASEAN will face more severe and complex challenges. Associated with leadership, the ASEAN countries will face at least three serious challenges in the future. The first is the establishment of a stable and mature democracy in most ASEAN countries. The ASEAN context presents both opportunities and challenges for democratic transitions. The ASEAN Charter espouses principles of democracy, good governance, and the rule of law, providing a normative framework for member states to uphold democratic values. Additionally, regional mechanisms such as

the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) aim to promote human rights and democracy within the region. However, the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states has often constrained ASEAN's ability to address democratic backsliding and human rights abuses effectively (Emmerson, 20019).

Moreover, most ASEAN countries are still in the process of transitioning or transforming to a democratic system. The intensity of the transition process still leaves the domestic political, social, and economic volatility and instability of each ASEAN member. The democratization process in ASEAN countries, on the one hand, has provided greater space for people to participate in their respective political processes, including determining their leader (Paul, 2010). However, on the other hand, the process of transition to democracy often creates 'political instability' and also produces weak and incapable leaders. The democratic system they are implementing today has opened up a wider space for 'division' or distribution of power and support for certain leaders so that the new leaders of the election results often have weak political support in their own country. This ultimately affects the effectiveness of the leadership of the leader, including in carrying out his foreign policy.

The second challenge faced by ASEAN is the difficulty of having strong leaders with political support and legitimacy both within the country and at the ASEAN regional level, as happened in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, some Southeast Asian countries, particularly Singapore, emerged as regional leaders during this period. Singapore's rapid economic development, efficient governance, and diplomatic acumen earned it respect and influence within ASEAN and beyond. Singapore's founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, plays a pivotal role in shaping ASEAN's agenda and promoting regional cooperation. This leadership contributed to Singapore's domestic political support and legitimacy within ASEAN.

Meanwhile, in the past two decades, only a few strong leaders have appeared in ASEAN member countries, like in the previous era. Almost all ASEAN member countries fail to produce strong and influential leaders within their respective countries and in Southeast Asia. Many leaders who emerged from the Suharto era and their friends are 'immature leaders' who lack experience and do not have a good track record in the field of political leadership. This situation is exacerbated by the enactment of dynastic politics and transactional politics in many ASEAN member countries. As a result, leaders who appear and are elected are not people who have leadership as needed and expected.

For example, this has happened in the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore in almost the last two decades. Since the reform era took place in Indonesia, its domestic politics have been divided in such a way. Political power spread to several strongholds, no longer able to be monopolized by a certain political force like political parties during the New Order era under the leadership of President Suharto. In the era of President SBY, for example, the political power in Parliament is divided in such a way. Even though SBY won the presidential election in 2009, the party that

promoted SBY could only control 26.79% of seats in the legislative body (Soesastro, 2009). Similar things also happened in the era of President Jokowi. However, he was successfully elected as Indonesia's president in the 2014 election, and his supporting party, PDIP, could only control 19.5% of seats in the legislative body (Simandjuntak, 2019).

From these descriptions, it can be concluded that leadership among the leaders of ASEAN countries has played a major role in forming and developing ASEAN as a regional organization that has successfully reached the present stage. The success of the formation and development of ASEAN is largely determined by the presence of strong and very influential leaders both within their respective countries and at the international level at that time, such as President Suharto, Malaysian Prime Minister Tengku Abdurrahman, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, and Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. They are not only the source of ideas and ideas but also become the most decisive factor in justifying, executing, and implementing these ideas in the effort of the realization and development of ASEAN. It is hard to imagine that ASEAN would have been formed and succeeded in achieving success to the present stage without the efforts and support of these leaders.

However, it is worth noting that one significant criticism of strong leadership is the potential for a lack of diversity in decision-making (Alagappa, 1995). Strong leaders may dominate decision-making processes, stifling dissenting opinions or alternative viewpoints. This can result in a narrow range of perspectives being considered, leading to suboptimal decisions. Without input from diverse voices, blind spots may emerge, and innovative solutions may be overlooked. Moreover, strong leadership can sometimes morph into authoritarianism, where leaders exert excessive control and suppress dissent. In the context of figures like Suharto in Indonesia and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines, strong leadership is indeed associated with non-democratic regimes (Tyson & Nawawi, 2022). Both Suharto and Marcos have exercised authoritarian control over their respective countries for decades, using their power to suppress political opposition, control the media, and amass personal wealth.

Today, there are indications that ASEAN is beginning to lack stock leaders with strong and influential leadership characteristics both at the domestic and regional levels. As a result, developments and achievements achieved by ASEAN in more or less the last two decades can be said to be not optimal, if not can be said to slow down. This does not mean that the current leadership has not succeeded in contributing anything to ASEAN. However, if look deeper, their contribution is more of a formality, such as in the form of agreements, MoUs, agreements, and other cooperation schemes and mechanisms. Unfortunately, the achievement is still not beneficial if measured from the extent to which ASEAN member countries can and have implemented all agreements and cooperation or schemes and mechanisms of cooperation they have made.

Conclusion

The presence of strong and influential leaders, both at the domestic level of each ASEAN member country and in the international and Southeast Asian region, will significantly determine the integrity and development of ASEAN in the future. Only with the presence of a strong leadership like that will ASEAN be able to maintain its integrity and, at the same time, be able to accelerate the realization of a just, prosperous, and peaceful ASEAN society in the future.

Even though the challenges ahead are very tough, as previously explained, ASEAN still has opportunities and chances to continue to improve and maintain cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity among its member countries. By thinking and being more optimistic, in fact, ASEAN still has quite a few big opportunities to achieve this goal. From a geopolitical and geostrategic perspective, ASEAN also has a crucial and strategic position for the competing major power countries, China and the United States. The geographical location of ASEAN is to be the center or heart of the competition arena between the two countries in the field of politics and security. This is demonstrated by the existence of conflicts in the South China Sea involving China, the United States, and several ASEAN member countries, where each country places its military power in the region in anticipation of military action by a country against another country or the outbreak of war (Sukma, 2012).

This very strategic geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geostrategic position makes ASEAN and its member countries, on the one hand, vulnerable to divisions due to the massive and intense rivalry of these major powers, as happened in the case of the South China Sea. But on the other hand, this provides an opportunity for ASEAN and its member countries. This position can also be an opportunity for ASEAN and its member countries to maintain cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity between them.

Capital owned by ASEAN economically and politically and with powerful security can be capitalized to strengthen the bargaining position of ASEAN and its member countries towards these outside countries, especially towards the major power countries, namely China and the United States. For example, this capital can be used by ASEAN and its member countries to persuade major power countries such as China and the United States to respect the sovereignty of ASEAN countries, stop provocative actions, and interfere in the internal affairs of ASEAN countries, which can divide ASEAN (Sukma, 2014). Thus, ASEAN has a greater opportunity to maintain the stability and internal security of each country and maintain its internal solidity, cohesiveness, and solidarity. Most importantly, it consistently realizes ASEAN's goals and ideals and implements mechanisms to achieve them through these suggestions.

First, the existence of these facts can encourage awareness among ASEAN member countries that they are interdependent and need each other for the economic, political, and security interests of their respective countries. This awareness can be used as a basis so that they continue to strengthen and maintain cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity.

Only with cohesiveness, solidity, and solidarity can they achieve their respective national goals and also the common goal of establishing ASEAN.

Second, this fact can attract the interest of other countries outside ASEAN to establish closer cooperation with ASEAN. This is because ASEAN is seen as a big market for the country's trade and a fertile place to invest. This great economic and trade attraction can become ASEAN's capital when negotiating with these foreign countries. This can explain why China, the US, Japan, India, and Australia are strongly interested in ASEAN and its member countries. On the other hand, ASEAN also needs the presence of those countries because of their enormous potential in various fields, including economic and trade, politics, and security. In this context, Indonesia can play its role as an agenda setter and decision maker to strategic ideas. Moreover, Indonesia can act as a conflict resolver (negotiator/mediator) in the context of ASEAN internal conflicts and conflicts between ASEAN countries and between ASEAN member countries and foreign countries. Indonesia can also become a 'role model' and 'main bridge' to strengthen relations and cooperation between neighboring countries outside ASEAN in various fields.

For this reason, Indonesia and ASEAN must continue to maintain the stability and internal security of each country. In this context, it is very necessary to have a strong leader who has strong domestic and international political support and trust. The leader must also have a clear vision and serious attention to ASEAN's future development efforts. In addition, the leader in question must also have the ability to make and implement/implement agreements, policies, or programs that have been made by ASEAN.

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