

DEMOCRATIZING ASEAN? A TOPOLOGICAL VIEW

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"Asean is facing fierce competition and pressure from the outside world. It needs a lot of rethinking, retooling and readjusting ..."

--Surin Pitsuwan, ASEAN Secretary-General-designate, 18 June 2007¹

In your program, several of the topics assigned to me and my fellow presenters at this event may strike you—they struck me—as nearly synonymous: Cook’s “Regionalism,” Rolfe’s “Regional Architecture,” and Severino’s “Regional Architecture and ASEAN,” compared with my own assignment, “ASEAN” *tout court*. It is hardly possible to discuss ASEAN without referring to regionalism or regional architecture, so I will not try.

Nor will I question why, in a symposium on “Regional Strategies,” no one has been assigned the task of problematizing regionalism, for example, by comparing the costs and benefits of a regional or subregional—multilateral or plurilateral—strategy with those entailed by a bilateral or even a unilateral approach to a given problem. The omission is nonetheless curious, especially here in Singapore, whose authorities not so long ago, impatient with slow progress toward an ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA), broke ranks with their ASEAN colleagues and pioneered a trend toward bilateral trade agreements that continues to this day.

As for unilateralism, anyone who remembers the demonstrated potential of the highway from Changi to become a runway for take-off by pilots in the finest air force in Southeast Asia will probably agree that the makers of Singapore’s foreign policy have never abandoned the unilateral option implied by self-reliance. Nor, of course, does regionalism encompass the far larger policy arena in which Singapore also positions itself as an avowedly “global” or “world-class” metropolis.

That said, I will stop nibbling the hand that feeds and try instead to say a few things that might otherwise go unsaid in the course of our discussion of such overlapping subjects.

On our forum’s agenda, the target of regional strategy seems mainly a matter of security, specifically the Northeast and Southeast Asian “Security Arrangements” that you will

¹ “Asean Needs Retooling to Face Competition from Outside: Surin,” *The Nation* [Bangkok], 19 June 2007.

hear about later this afternoon. All the more reason for me to complement that emphasis by focusing my own remarks on democracy.²

I begin by drawing what I hope are some useful analytic distinctions between Southeast Asia as a region and ASEAN as an organization. Next I discuss the goal of transforming Southeast Asia into something more than a collection of states—that is, a community—and the extension of ASEAN’s regional leadership to include all of East Asia. I recommend some questions for research. I then portray ASEAN as a consociational organization and develop that idea into a “topological” view of regionalism in Southeast Asia. I sketch two axes along which democracy may be differently understood, and highlight the difficulty for ASEAN of “verticalizing” its traditionally horizontal democracy. I offer sobering recent evidence of the scarcity of vertical democracy inside the member states.

I end with a speculation as to whether the awaited Charter will facilitate the democratization of ASEAN’s members, or the centralization of ASEAN as an organization, especially insofar as the second reform might be considered a requisite to the first.

Region ≠ Organization

Southeast Asia the region and ASEAN the organization are not the same thing.

Is this already so obvious that its restatement needlessly repeats what everyone already knows? I think not. Not among those ordinary Southeast Asians for whom ASEAN might as well be on Mars, nor among those regionalist elites and foreign observers for whom ASEAN has become a shorthand expression for Southeast Asia.

The *region* occupies some five million square miles of the earth’s surface. As of last month (July 2007), an estimated 573,742,521 people were living on its roughly 1,736,000 square miles of land, using its 3,264,000 square miles of sea, and conforming—or not—to the laws of its ten separate and different countries.³

On any given day last month these hundreds of millions of individual human beings were doing hundreds of millions of specific things: waking up or going to sleep; eating or not, working or not, learning or not; listening or speaking, laughing or crying, living or dying—and so on through an infinitely rich and constantly changing spectrum of particular acts or states of being.

Now pretend you are using Google Earth. Zoom down to Indonesia; then to Jakarta; then to zip code 12110 in Kebayoran; then to a street named Sisingamangaraja after an ethnic-Batak hero who died 70 years ago this past June, long before ASEAN was even a gleam

² As to why an American should be the one to highlight democracy, I leave that to your speculation. The choice does conform, I admit, to the stereotype of Americans as peculiarly obsessed with democracy—and with spreading it, like peanut butter on a slice of bread, around the world.

³ The estimated population sums the ten country figures in Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>, while land and sea estimates were obtained by searching “Southeast Asia” in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <http://www.britannica.com>. The addition of Timor-Leste would not change these figures much.

in Thanat Khoman's eye; and finally to the alphanumeric address 70-A. There, in the building that houses its secretariat, unquestionably, tangibly, *ASEAN* exists. But with all due respect, where else in Southeast Asia is its presence so directly evident?⁴

To equate Southeast Asia as a region with ASEAN as an organization is to commit a fallacy of composition. Yet because all ten countries in the region belong to the organization, and because the organization can thereby, in some sense, claim to represent the region, the fallacy has been and still is committed, or implied, so often by observers and analysts that few even notice the error.

Metonymy is a figure of speech, used for convenience, a matter of style. Take the author of an essay or a talk on, say, Indonesian foreign policy. Lest readers or listeners grow weary with repeated references to "the Indonesian government," he or she may occasionally substitute the one word "Jakarta," as if the latter term were synonymous with the former. And despite references to "Jakarta" as having said or done this or that, it should indeed be clear to all that "the Indonesian government" and not the literal city is meant.

Metonymy morphs into fallacy, however, when a stylistic convenience becomes so embedded in discourse that it affects the content of what we think—when we actually do begin to mistake the part for the whole, either by confusing the city of Jakarta with the far vaster and more populous expanse of the Indonesian archipelago, or by blinding ourselves to the existence of "Indonesian government" in that larger and, in its own ways, no less political space.

Now consider "the ASEAN region." Who among analysts of ASEAN has not used this commonplace name?⁵ You will find it as well on the ASEAN Secretariat's website:

The ASEAN region has a population of about 500 million, a total area of 4.5 million square kilometers, a combined gross domestic product of almost US\$ 700 billion, and a total trade of about US\$ 850 billion.⁶

⁴ The ASEAN name is of course used by many organizations. Among these are ASEAN-designated centers that work on specialized topics. An ASEAN Center for Energy, e.g., can be found on the 6th floor of another building in Jakarta, while an ASEAN Center for Biodiversity occupies room 3F in a building on the Los Banos campus of the University of the Philippines. ASEAN has discussed establishing an ASEAN Center for Combating Transnational Crime. But none of these existing or proposed centers exemplifies ASEAN as centrally or as comprehensively as does the Secretariat. As for the Southeast Asia Regional Center for Counter-Terrorism, inaugurated in Kuala Lumpur in 2003, it is not an ASEAN affiliate, which incidentally illustrates my point that ASEAN and Southeast Asia are not the same thing.

⁵ On 16 August 2007, amazon.com listed 537 book titles in which the phrase "the ASEAN region" could be found. A foray through Google into cyberspace two days later revealed that, measured by the estimated number of web pages referring to either phrase, "the ASEAN region" is roughly twice as common as "the Southeast Asian region" on the internet. The same skewed representation holds as well for "ASEAN" compared with "Southeast Asia". By this admittedly narrow measure of proportional electronic attention, the Association has swallowed the region. Should we congratulate ASEAN on its success in assimilating Southeast Asia (SEA), acronymically already its own middle name? Should we lament the eclipsing of such a vast and variegated region by a single organization? Should we reject both responses on the grounds that the region and the organization have become so thoroughly intertwined as to preclude any verbal distinction between them? Is this an irrelevant language game that only an academic with a laptop and too much free time would bother to play?

Is this a matter of mere style, or actual substance—metonymy, or fallacy? It is, for different people: neither, one, the other, or both.

“Neither” would apply to people, inside and outside the region, who do not know what ASEAN is, and who therefore could not understand the phrase either stylistically or substantively.

What proportion of the 574 million or so people now alive in Southeast Asia have no idea what ASEAN is? 25 percent? 50 percent? 75 percent? Does anyone know? I don’t. What I do know is that without doing the careful survey research necessary to answer this question, we cannot fully assess the extent to which “the ASEAN region” is a coinage by elites who have lulled themselves into solipsism: dreaming a dream so realistic that it must be true.

Remember when the Marxists fancied the proletariat as a “class of *and for* itself”—and were disappointed when millions of workers in the real world preferred higher wages and better working conditions to communism? Is it possible that ASEANists have comparably postponed their own disappointment by not bothering to determine, on the ground, among the particulars of actual lives, what “Southeast Asians” think of regionalism, if they think of it all?

As a scholar occupationally biased in favor of research, and with full respect for ISEAS and whatever assistance it may have received from ASEAN, I have long thought that among all seven of the promises made in the Association’s founding Bangkok Declaration forty years ago, the least implemented is the sixth: “to promote South-East Asian studies.”⁷

And by the way, has anyone actually done systematic research to compare the extent to which each of the seven promises has been met—how, why, and with what implications for the *next* forty years? If so, what were the results? If not, why not? And shouldn’t such research, along with measuring ASEAN’s actual cognitive footprint in the region, be a priority for Southeast Asian studies, funded by ASEAN or not?

Introspection is no less appropriate in elite-level ASEAN circles. Leaving aside the hundreds of millions and what they know or don’t know, what do the mere hundred or so who have most influenced the Association think of the multiple disconnects between it and the region that, in some sense, it represents? To what extent does this select and consequential group deny or acknowledge—tolerate or regret—the incongruity between ASEAN’s great salience in their own privileged daily lives and thoughts, and its possible insignificance in those of most of the people we choose to call Southeast Asians?

⁶ “Overview: Association of Southeast Asian Nations” (2006), <http://www.aseansec.org/64.htm>; italics mine.

⁷ “The ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration),” ASEAN Secretariat, <http://www.aseansec.org/1212.htm>.

These are not rhetorical questions. It is entirely possible that reducing the distance between the organization and “its” population could leave both worse off. Which problems lend themselves most *but also least* to regional solution? *On whose terms* would the fit between the institution and the region be improved? *Cui bono*—for the good of whom?

Socializations and Scenarios

The issue raised by these questions is often construed, at gatherings like this one, as the challenge of “socializing” of ASEAN. Let us imagine doing the needed research and discovering that on the Association’s birthday less than three weeks ago, on 8 August, only one in ten adults in Southeast Asia even knew of the occasion. Our temptation would be to “socialize” the Association *downward* to the base of society. Following this vector of descent, elites would, in effect, tell the mass public what it did not, but really ought to, know.⁸ Education would trump participation.

But why should ordinary folks be patronized in this fashion? If it turns out that ASEAN is basically irrelevant to their lives, shouldn’t they be left alone to spend their scarce time on learning and doing things that could actually help them make those lives safer, healthier, and more satisfying? ASEAN is abstract, a far-off thing; their circumstances are immediate, concrete. Is knowledge of ASEAN a luxury they—or many of them—can’t afford? A cynic might even suggest that the likelihood of reaching such disconcerting conclusions could be one reason why the elites for whom ASEAN matters most have seemed less than eager to ascertain the actual views of those for whom it could matter least.

I am not a cynic. But there is merit in spinning the notion of socialization *upward*, as a matter of self-interested learning and active involvement by citizens around the region—and not only in ASEAN events and programs but also, to the extent feasible and worthwhile, in its decisions. Elites need not read into this idea a threat of demagogic populism. The key criteria are “feasible and worthwhile,” and there is no reason they could not be given operational content. Opinion surveys, focus groups, internship programs, and public debates are among the channels and venues that come readily to mind. It is too late to “upwardly socialize” the ASEAN Charter, but insofar as it will require ratification by the member states, could not the member societies still take part? More radically still, what are the arguments for—and against—ratification by referendum?

So my topic is now democracy. And it should be clear by now that it is not possible to think clearly about democracy without first separating, for purposes of analysis, Southeast Asia the region from ASEAN the organization.

⁸ A good example of downward socialization is *Know Your ASEAN* (Singapore: ISEAS [Institute of Southeast Asian Studies], 2007), which poses and answers 40 questions about ASEAN. The 40th question asks “How does one learn more about ASEAN?” and answers, “The best way of learning more about ASEAN is by going to the ASEAN Secretariat’s Web site, <http://www.aseansec.org>” (p. 50). Fair enough, but how many of the nearly 600 million people living in Southeast Asia are equipped with internet access and fluency in English? Official ASEAN discourse is monolingual; all communications, including its website, must be in English. This policy saves the Association time and money, but limits its cognitive footprint in one of the linguistically most diverse regions in the world.

In fact ASEAN refers not to two but to *three* different though related phenomena. The first two are called to mind respectively by the acronym's first and final letters: the "A" that stands for the Association—the organization whose staff occupies the building on Sisimangaraja Street in Jakarta—and the "N" that stands for the Nations—the sovereign member states.

On ASEAN's organizational chart, the central "A" is explicitly present in every "N" because of the "National Secretariat of ASEAN" that exists in every member state. But these offices are not supranationally loyal to ASEAN. Each one is a unit within that member state's specialized and jurisdictionally limited ministry of foreign affairs, and responsible not to ASEAN's secretary general—rather more of a secretary than a general, as the current incumbent, Ong Keng Yong, has liked to joke—but to the foreign minister in that national capital. In this respect, ASEAN's AMM is deceptive. It not an ASEAN Ministers Meeting but an AFMM—an ASEAN Foreign Ministers Meeting.

This subsuming of the "regional" function under diplomacy further weakens the case for ASEAN as comprehensively representative of, and responsive to, the myriad activities and concerns of every member society and hence coterminous with the region itself. Not to mention the idea of synergy: that even if ASEAN were the full and impressive sum of its member states, Southeast Asia as a region would amount to more.

Can ASEAN transform Southeast Asia into a single "sharing and caring community" with an empathically regional sensibility if the relations among members—relations at the core of that would-be community—are still, organizationally, *foreign* affairs? On the one hand, why not? Why should a mere administrative convenience impede regional solidarity? On the other hand, if the rest of a given member state feels that ASEAN's affairs are for diplomats not them, how will the desired regional sharing and caring take hold and spread?

The third and most elusive element in the acronym is represented by the appropriately maritime-sounding middle three letters—the "SEA" inside "ASEAN." This is the Southeast Asian region that the Association and the Nations publicly say they are teamed up to foster, but whose purpose and authority they privately, and sometimes not so privately, contest.

The "SEA" is elusive because, unlike the organization (the "A") and the states (the "Ns"), the region is less directly apprehended. There is nothing so tangible, visible, or audible as ASEAN's building on Sisingamangaraja, or the flags, anthems, capitals, bureaucracies, and populations of the member states, to indicate the existence and nature of a Southeast Asian region. If the "A" and the "Ns" are encountered, the "SEA" is inferred.

The tendency, especially in policy circles, is to think, speak, and write as if Southeast Asia = ASEAN = the ten member states.

But this is not satisfactory. How can this vast and variegated region be reduced to a single organization of which many "Southeast Asians" are still unaware? How can Southeast Asia be the mere sum of its member states? How can a region in which

politics, though important, are but one aspect of life be framed along such thoroughly political lines? One can say that East Timor “exited” Indonesia. But did it at that moment then cease being part of Southeast Asia? Simply because it was no longer either inside a member of ASEAN or itself a member of ASEAN? Should geography be decided by political science?

Far from confining the region within national-political-ASEAN borders, an ethnolinguistic definition of Southeast Asia might lop off Melanesian Indonesia, add chunks of China adjacent to Burma and Laos, and embrace groups of people in places as distant as Taiwan and Madagascar. An economic-transactional definition of Southeast Asia, taking full account of the role of the overseas Chinese, could render porous to the point of near-erasure the region’s boundaries with Northeast Asia. Not to mention the shapes that could be drawn from the standpoint of geology, climate, flora, fauna, and so on. Remember Wallace’s Line? It has since been thickened into Wallacea, but it still cuts through eastern Indonesia.⁹

ASEAN wishes to turn “its” region into a *socio-cultural* community. Can it do so without overthrowing this tyranny of political criteria?

If the existence of a region depends on the extent to which those who live in it are conscious of it, one can picture the ontological status of any region, including Southeast Asia, fluctuating over time—at times more factual, at other times more fictive. The quote marks around “Southeast Asia” could become faint and disappear, but then reappear and thicken. Encased in such marks or not, will the name exist a century hence? Does a region without a name no longer exist? Is Southeast Asia in this sense presently in chrysalis, that is, coming into existence? Or is it, conceivably, undergoing decay—going out of existence?

It may be impolitic to contemplate extinction. But if one wishes to nourish the region (the “SEA”) to the point of transforming it into a community, it could be helpful to know the actual trending of present conditions. Beyond the waxing or waning of regional consciousness, one could also usefully examine the balance of recourse to regional and non-regional means of solving problems. It is counter-intuitive and historically counter-factual to believe that, over time, the depth and scope of regionalism can only increase.

Useful too would be some systematic attention to the likely triggers, the rough probabilities, and the plausible consequences of an operationally defined “failure” to create a Southeast Asian community. It is hard to prevent what one never thought could occur.

Specifically and practically, what would Southeast Asia have to look like in order to warrant—and not warrant—the name “community”? Sharing is behavioral; caring is emotional. Is regionalism simultaneously and necessarily a behavior- *and* psychology-changing project? If poverty in Southeast Asia were drastically reduced, and ongoing security secured, should anyone mind if the Gini index of relative inequality were not as low as it might be, or if some not yet invented index of regional empathy could be higher? Or am I succumbing to the occupational hazard of ASEANology by taking what

⁹ See, e.g., Teresa Zubi, “Wallacea,” 2006, <http://www.starfish.ch/dive/Wallacea.html>.

is written and spoken (“a sharing and caring community”) more seriously than what is actually done?

I have noted the tyranny of political measures of what a region is. But it is also interesting to note that ASEAN has set its sights on a security community, an economic community, and a socio-cultural community but not a political community. Does the omission mean that a *democratic* community is beyond both the ability and the intention of the Association?

In recommending preventive attention to a carefully defined “failure” to turn Southeast Asia into a community, I do not fear a Hobbesian war of all against all that would, by pitting the “Ns” against each other, rip the “A” to shreds. Arguably, ASEAN has been too successful at security for that to happen. But one could usefully ask questions such as this:

What conditions would be most conducive to a crystallization of the organization’s two tiers—roughly put, a “northwestern” or “subcontinental” group of later-joining, poorer, and less democratic members that differ more or less consistently on these dimensions from their roughly “southeastern” or “maritime” co-members—to the point where the Association begins to look incipiently *dualistic*? In terms of deadlines for economic integration, after all, ASEAN is already a bicycle with two speeds.

Or one could ask: What conditions would be most likely to bring about a *submerging* of ASEAN inside one or more larger, East Asian regional frames? So far, in initiatives to move forward toward wider regionalisms, ASEAN leaders have insisted on playing the locomotive not the caboose. The “A” comes first in APT (ASEAN Plus Three), and in ARF as well (the ASEAN Regional Forum).

But of course the “A” in the EAS (the East Asia Summit) stands for Asia not ASEAN. ASEAN has played the leadership role in pulling the EAS into existence. But as the scope of regionalism is enlarged to include great swaths of national population, material production, and military capacity in Northeast Asia and parts of South Asia and Australasia, a friendly observer may be forgiven for wondering: How long can the tail continue to wag the dog?

An ANEAN—an “Association of Northeast Asian Nations,” or other initials to that effect—is, to be sure, a long way off, as anyone familiar with the mistrust typically evident at meetings of Northeast Asian officials lately, even on Track II, can attest. But it is not too early to assess and compare the costs and benefits of (a) defending ASEAN’s broader-scale leadership role against any erosion, versus (b) preparing to share it or even, in time, to relinquish it on terms that could be, in the long run, more favorable to peace and security in Northeast Asia, and thus indirectly more beneficial to Southeast Asia as well.

The policy difference here is between insisting on ASEAN’s prerogatives as an organization on paper and figuring out how to solve problems and alleviate dangers on the ground, including the risks of calamity in North Korea or the Taiwan Strait; Sino-Japanese and Korean-Japanese tensions over history and territory; and the violent

intersecting of inter- and intra-state enmities from India through Afghanistan. Does ASEAN have a comparative advantage in these respects? Institutional pride in playing the vanguard role is one thing. Policy efficacy is another.

I do not wish to be misunderstood. ASEAN's success in spinning off larger multilateralisms has been beneficial. ASEAN diplomacy deserves, for example, part of the credit for facilitating the skilful shift in China's regional outlook toward a greater willingness to adapt and a reduced inclination to confront. (Although we should not exaggerate the extent of Chinese fidelity to the "code of conduct" brokered by ASEAN on the South China Sea, where the PRC navy has been willing to attack Vietnamese fishing boats with fatal results.)¹⁰ Rather I am suggesting that ASEAN should, from time to time, revisit and re-justify its primacy in extra-ASEAN networks, and do so based on accomplishment not entitlement.

It is entirely possible that such a review would sustain the present rationale—that precisely because of its distance from and disinterest in most Asian flash points, ASEAN should remain "in the driver's seat." But circumstances change, and it would be better for all concerned to update this received opinion from time to time.

Toward a Topology of ASEAN

Having distinguished ASEAN from the region and the states across in which it operates, we can now ask: Should ASEAN itself, as an organization, be made more democratic?

This question is rather novel in scholarly work and public discourse on ASEAN. The classic themes of ASEANology have been, and remain, security and economy not democracy.¹¹ Consecutively since the 1980s, dramatic transitions from authoritarian rule in the Philippines, Thailand, and especially Indonesia have stimulated scholarly and journalistic coverage of democracy in those countries. The tribulations of Aung Suu Kyi in Burma (Myanmar) have sustained external concern at the absence of democracy in that country. But as these examples suggest, in dealing with democracy—its presence, absence, shortcomings, suitability, prospects, and so on—scholars, journalists, activists,

¹⁰ See the 19 July 2007 report in *The Straits Times* of a Chinese attack ten days earlier that killed a Vietnamese fisherman and wounded several others—despite the promises not to use force and to exercise self-restraint contained in the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea signed by China (and the ASEAN states) at the Association's 2002 summit in Phnom Penh. A Declaration on Conduct is less binding than a Code of Conduct. Hence the quote marks around "code of conduct" in my text. But that hardly exonerates China. Nor is China's objection to a legally binding Code as opposed to a merely intentional Declaration the only obstacle to achieving the former. Insofar as a *legal* (rather than wishful) obligation not to use force would render de jure the de facto control of islets previously seized by unilateral action, including force, one or more of the four Southeast Asian claimants—Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam—might also object to a Code. The government in Hanoi, e.g., would not want a Code that, in effect, legitimated China's seizure of the Paracels from Vietnam in the 1970s. Off and on over decades of trying to resolve the multiple conflicting positions involved, Indonesian diplomats have privately expressed frustration (to me) when their fellow ASEAN members—notably Malaysia—seemed to behave in ways that made them part of the problem not its solution.

¹¹ Googling the relevant pairs of words (each pair in quote marks to ensure exact matches) on 18 August 2007 yielded "about" 53,100, 23,900, and 506 web pages for, respectively, "ASEAN security", "ASEAN economy", and "ASEAN democracy". By this admittedly crude and contingent measure, "ASEAN democracy" accounted for a miniscule 0.7 percent of the total attention paid to all three topics.

and policymakers, native and foreign, have almost always construed it in *national* terms, framing it inside the boundaries of this or that Southeast Asian state. As of the time of writing this essay, not only “democracy in Burma” (or “in Myanmar”) and “democracy in Indonesia,” but even “democracy in Laos” enjoyed a larger profile on the internet than did “democracy in ASEAN.”¹² And if by “ASEAN” in the latter phrase was meant not the organization but the region or the states, the paucity of institutional coverage is all the more striking.

I am not asserting that ASEAN is internally undemocratic. I am arguing for greater attention to democracy inside the organization relative to democracy in the region or in its countries. Lacking time, space, and expertise to pursue the matter in detail, suffice it to sketch one possible way of approaching the subject.

The national model that in my judgment works best as a template for interpreting ASEAN the regional organization is consociational democracy. Bypassing the considerable literature on this topic,¹³ I would define the term *consociation* as follows:

Consociation is a political format in which significantly different and potentially conflicting populations live in peace and make progress by authorizing their respective elites to make consensual decisions on their behalf.

Consociation may be pictured as a landscape comprising a ring of several or more neighboring mountains of different heights and size. Each mountain is a distinctive social group that narrows upward from a mass base to a ruling elite. Consultation occurs between the elites that are incumbent on the topmost slopes and peaks.

Voluminous though it may be, the scholarship on consociation is in my (limited) reading experience metaphorically incomplete. Ignored is the space within the ring. Yet if we incorporate that space into the metaphor, we can make some analytically useful things happen. Initially we can picture an inter-mountain basin—a dale or dell—nestled inside the ring at an elevation that can run from much lower than, to nearly as high as, the peaks that surround it. Pulling the topology still farther upward, we can imagine the basin changing its shape from concave to convex as it rises above the ring to become a central mountain now towering over the peaks that once overshadowed it.

In this process we have, I would argue, created a three-dimensional map of ASEAN as—pardon my jargon—a *consociational basin* of ten national member states encircling a focal secretariat located at an elevation that is below and subordinated to the members’ rulers, yet higher and thus nearer those rulers than are the subterranean masses inside the social bases of the ten respective member countries.

¹² On 18 August 2007, Google yielded the following estimates of the numbers of web pages containing these phrases: “democracy in Burma”: 78,200; “democracy in Indonesia”: 47,300; “democracy in Myanmar”: 22,000; “democracy in Laos”: 6,070; and “democracy in ASEAN”: 5,670.

¹³ See, notably, Lijphart Arendt, *Democracy in Plural Societies: Comparative Exploration* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977) and *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984).

For the first decade of ASEAN's existence, the organization's original five mountains shot steeply upward from an empty plain. In 1976, by creating a low-profile secretariat for itself, ASEAN modestly elevated this plain into a basin. Slowly and unevenly over the next three decades, as ASEAN's agenda grew and its activities—especially its meetings—proliferated, the Secretariat gained more responsibilities and correspondingly higher elevations.

It was not until 1992 that ASEAN even had a secretary general in the sense of its own chief of staff. Only then was “the Secretary-General of the ASEAN Secretariat” renamed “the Secretary-General of ASEAN.” Only then could one even begin to entertain the possibility that someone with the latter job title might someday, just possibly, occupy the peak of one truly and massively *regional* ASEAN mountain—a majestic eminence level with, higher than, or even conceivably integrating into its own flanks all the mountains belonging to it. From a peak-ringed basin, to a mesa or plateau, to a single unringed peak—less and less concave, more and more convex.

In this *faux*-geological context, one may say only half-jokingly that ASEAN is a misnomer. As it stands today it should be called the Consociational Basin of Southeast Asian States. Only upon reaching a more advanced stage in this (just barely) conceivable metamorphosis (in time for an 80th anniversary in 2047?) could the CBSAS be properly renamed the Coordinating Mesa of Southeast Asian States. Even less conceivably, still farther along this fanciful evolutionary path toward complete integration, the CMSAS could be fully unified (in 2097? 3097? never?), as a single Peak Community of Southeast Asian Nations or, less verbosely, a Southeast Asian Union—equipped with one citizenship, one currency, and one government making one policy atop one big and fully regional (post-national) alp.

Cherished as if they really were the future, teleologies are traps. (Witness the current chagrin of Western—largely American—believers in the inevitability of secular democracy.) But a visual provocation can be useful. Shorn of any implied let alone predicted progression from one pattern to another, the three shapes—basin, mesa, peak—can help us think more creatively about ASEAN, and what it *might or might not* and *should or should not* become, and why.

Chartering Convexity?

The EU is only ten years older than ASEAN (counting from the Rome Treaty of 1957), but it resembles a mesa far more than ASEAN does. Do ASEAN's movers, shakers, and thinkers want their own Association to become less of a basin and more of a mesa, by empowering—elevating—its secretariat? Some might say that an intellectually infectious disease has been spreading among ASEAN thinkers: EU envy. Insofar as this is true, is the envy driven by a desire for democracy or a desire for integration? Compared with ASEAN, after all, the EU has both.

Are the two goals even compatible? Democratization in ASEAN discourse is construed as intervention—a search for ways in which ASEAN as a regional body might prod or cajole an authoritarian member regime into being nicer to its own people. In conversations about ASEAN, presenting the case for democratization in this way

routinely triggers a counter-argument based on the sovereignty of each member state, construed as a sacrosanct principle without which ASEAN would, in effect, intervene itself to death.

If all of the members of ASEAN were already democracies, their integration could help secure, strengthen, and deepen that status. Shared markets could have proven conducive to shared prosperity, which could have reinforced the instrumental legitimacy of democracy. That is basically the history of the EU. But as Table 1 on the next page shows, at least by one estimation of the extent to which political rights and civil liberties are observed in the ten states that already belong to ASEAN, six of them are “not free,” three are only “partly free,” and only one (Indonesia) is “free.”

The EU requires members to be democratic. Turkey is not yet a member but wants to be. So Turkey has an incentive to be more democratic—to pass the political test of entry. ASEAN imposes no such requirement. Authoritarian Burma is already a member. Burma has no such incentive to change. If by integration we mean simple involvement

Table 1:

FREEDOM HOUSE RATINGS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES FOR 2006
ON POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES, INCLUDING A SUMMARY
CLASSIFICATION AS “FREE,” “PARTLY FREE,” OR “NOT FREE”

Note: Freedom House, based in New York, annually classifies countries as “free,” “partly free,” or “not free.” Here in summary form are the organization’s Southeast Asian country ratings for 2006, including changes since 2005. Political Rights and Civil Liberties are scaled run from 1 to 7 in a worsening direction. Changes in Political Rights and Civil Liberties are “major” insofar as the numerical score on either or both of these dimensions was increased (worsened) or decreased (improved). “Lesser” trends were not large enough to warrant a numerical change.

<u>Country</u>	<u>Summary</u>	<u>Political Rights</u>	<u>Civil Liberties</u>	Improvement/Worsening 1 Dec. 2005-31 Dec. 2006		<u>Lesser Trend</u>
				<u>Major PR</u>	<u>CL</u>	
INDONESIA	Free	2	3			
PHILIPPINES	Partly Free	3	3			Worse
TIMOR-LESTE	Partly Free	3	4		Worse	
MALAYSIA	Partly Free	4	4			Worse
SINGAPORE	Partly Free	5	4			
BRUNEI	Not Free	6	5			
CAMBODIA	Not Free	6	5			

THAILAND	Not Free	7	4	Worse	Worse
VIETNAM	Not Free	7	5		
LAOS	Not Free	7	6		
MYANMAR	Not Free	7	7		

Source: These data were drawn from pp. 128-129 in Arch Puddington, “The Freedom House Survey: The Pushback against Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, 18: 2 (April 2007), pp. 125-137. The terms “major” and “lesser” are my own. I use these data because they are comprehensive, convenient, and conventional—not because I fully agree with all of the judgments they imply.

by virtue of membership, then regional integration in Southeast Asia may have been inimical to democratization—not an exercise of moral leverage but rather its abandonment. Security not democracy topped that first regional agenda in Bangkok in August 1967, and in the 1990s, in contrast to the EU’s expansion, ASEAN’s was driven more by geography than ideology.

How then, at this late date, can the democratization of its members be made a priority on ASEAN’s agenda except in a way that appears to be, itself, undemocratic? There are, after all, two kinds of democracy in operation here: vertical and horizontal. The standard national notion of democracy assumes *vertical* representation and accountability: Elected leaders can speak for the masses by virtue of being downwardly accountable to them. Consociational or ASEAN-style regional democracy—those ten member-state mountains encircling that merely secretarial basin—embodies a *horizontal* understanding of democracy: Incumbent elites, elected or not, are laterally accountable to each other across a table in a closed room in consultations that are democratic only insofar as the parties around the table respect each other’s equality and autonomy. Perhaps it is not too much a stretch to suggest that if vertical democracy means being mandated, horizontal democracy means being polite.¹⁴

There is no necessary contradiction between vertical and horizontal democracy. But other things being equal, the greater the socioeconomic, cultural, and political cleavages that distinguish one member country’s population from another’s, the greater the probability that vertical democracy will constrain the freedom and therefore the ability of elected elites to reach the consensus needed to make horizontal democracy work.

¹⁴ Acknowledging the formal equality and autonomy of member states need not deter big states from “persuading” small ones, of course. Because of their differing endowments, some members can afford to be less polite than others. Presently, Laos pays in ASEAN dues as much as Singapore does. Assessing members in proportion to their GDPs would strengthen the Secretariat while eroding the formal equality and autonomy that originally paved the “ASEAN Way.” One might even suggest, for the purpose of discussion, that one cannot have organizational reform and fully that hallowed but inefficient “Way” at the same time.

One consequence of this logic, discernable in the history of ASEAN, is the creation of an opportunity for unelected or spuriously elected consociational elites to acquiesce to a consensus inside the room, but then avoid implementing its directives upon leaving the room, secure in the impunity that autocracy at home continues to bestow—pending anger and challenge by the next round of “people power” or *reformasi* on the capital city’s streets. At the risk of unwanted cynicism in this context, one might wonder whether the increasing emphasis on “action agendas” in ASEAN’s rhetoric in recent years may betray frustration over precisely this slippage between decisions agreed on but not carried out, principles signed off on but not implemented, and the related opinion, to many Western observers, that ASEAN is nothing but a “talk shop.”

Enter convexity: the mesa. It is too soon to do more than speculate about the content let alone the consequences of the ASEAN Charter now being tweaked for unveiling at the Association’s 13th Summit in Singapore this November. The text may provide for a region-wide commission on human rights. But if I, an outsider, read the tea leaves right, in the near-term the Charter may contribute less to advancing democracy in member countries than to modestly strengthening—elevating—the role of the ASEAN Secretariat as a means of improving member compliance with ASEAN decisions.

One can debate whether, if this is done, the internal workings of the institution will be more democratic. Is foot-dragging undemocratic? Or just dilatory? Is voting, whose frequency could increase, more democratic than consensus? Between majority and minority tyranny, which do you prefer?

And if, as many expect, the Charter does also point the Association somewhat more toward protecting and encouraging democracy and human rights in its member states, empowering the Secretariat could be seen as a downward substitute for the upward empowerment of the millions who live in the region—the latter a revolutionary and thus unlikely goal in any event.

Certainly the new secretary general, Surin Pitsuwan, is well suited by background and previous initiative to apply the possibly enhanced power of the Secretariat to liberalizing ends. He has been a former foreign minister. But he has also been an elected politician. Do his ties to the *Democrat* Party in Thailand and his service as Founding Chairman of the Council of Asian *Liberals* and *Democrats* (1993-95) augur a positive answer to the question posed in the title of these remarks: “Democratizing ASEAN?”

Perhaps they do. The italics, however, are mine. And it seems ironic in this context that Surin would not have been chosen by the Thai government to lead ASEAN, or at any rate its secretariat, from January 2008 through December 2012 if not for the undemocratic action of the Thai military in overthrowing the elected government of Thaksin Shinawatra in September 2006.

I know and admire Surin. I wish him and ASEAN success. But it will not be easy to use the organization’s horizontal democracy to induce the vertical kind. Indeed, if the basin—the Secretariat—does grow more convex, it is hard to imagine that the heads of state and government arrayed on the mountain tops will merely sit back and watch it rise.