

FROM STATE TO SOCIETY?

DEMOCRACY AND REGIONALISM IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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[written for a *Festschrift* planned by
the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (Jakarta)
to honor CSIS Senior Fellow Jusuf Wanandi on his 70th birthday]

This essay was written in September 2007 in an interstitial if not pivotal moment: between the 40th birthday of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Bangkok on 8 August, and the expected announcement of an ASEAN Charter at the 13th summit of the Association in Singapore on 20 November. Future analysts may look back on the 2007 Summit as a threshold event, or mere business as usual, or something in between. Whatever their judgment, the intermission between the birthday of the organization and that of its new charter seemed an appropriately transitional time to comment, however briefly, on the Association and some of the challenges it faces.

I also wanted to link this essay to the person whom this *Festschrift* honors: Jusuf Wanandi. Accordingly, I selected an op ed by him on ASEAN and its plans for a charter first published in April 2006,¹ and made it a basis for my own ruminations. In thus responding to his ideas and using them as points of interpretive departure, I hoped to illustrate the stimulus that he has provided for students of ASEAN, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia over many years.

I was tempted to predict the content of the charter and its impact on ASEAN. But that would have amounted to short-term speculation, and I could well have been wrong. I chose instead to consider how questions of democracy may challenge the creativity of ASEAN's leaders and advisers in the longer run, whatever the text of its new charter does or does not say.

From State to Society?

In his 2006 essay, Wanandi argued that ASEAN needed to stay *relevant*, become *people-oriented*, and be *strengthened*.

“Today and tomorrow,” he wrote, “the challenge for ASEAN is to maintain its relevance” (p. 278). Drafting a charter, for Wanandi, was above all an opportunity to meet this challenge. ASEAN needed to “come up with proposals that will make ASEAN relevant for the next 40 years” (p. 280).

¹ Jusuf Wanandi, “The ASEAN Charter: Its Importance and Content,” an op ed published on 18 April 2006 and reprinted on pp. 278-280 of Wanandi, *Global, Regional and National: Strategic Issues & Linkages* (Jakarta: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2006)—a collection of such pieces. In my own discussion above, all parenthetical pages references are to this op ed.

Relevance lies in the eye of the beholder. In Wanandi's eyes, for ASEAN to stay relevant, it needed a charter that would strengthen the Association and make it people-oriented. Organizational strength was not an end in itself. Bolstering ASEAN would enable it to reach beyond the agendas of member-state elites to benefit more directly the estimated 574 million lives actually being lived in Southeast Asia.² That was what Wanandi meant by relevance.

Wanandi did not offer an operational definition of the term. Read within the context he did provide, however, his notion of relevance could be operationalized as the extent of ASEAN's attention to *human security*, both absolutely and relative to its traditional focus on *state security* in Southeast Asia. The greater the extent of such attention—up to some unspecified point—the greater the relevance of the Association.

Summarizing Wanandi's argument: ASEAN must become stronger so that it can use that strength to become more people-oriented and thereby maintain its relevance.

The timing of his advice raises an obvious question: Why now?

Wanandi might have argued that developments *inside* Southeast Asia had given rise to the need for a people-centered ASEAN focused more than before on human security.

Such an argument might have traced and projected ASEAN's internally driven evolution along lines such as these: In the course of its first forty years, the Association had succeeded in fostering ample rapport among the region's ruling elites. Security between states had thus segued from an urgent need in the 1960s to a realistic assumption—a given—in the 2000s. In ASEAN's lifetime, after all, no two member states had gone to war with each other. Having accomplished that initial mission—inter-state peace and comity among elites—ASEAN was now able to enrich its agenda with priorities for improving ordinary human security as well. Having grown organically, as it were, from the top down, the Association had naturally arrived at its next phase: sinking more and deeper roots in the societies that its member states were supposed, respectively, to serve.

One could summarize this logic in the jargon of diplo-speak by saying that ASEAN, having institutionalized itself on Track I, and established its legitimacy on Track II, had reached the stage where it was now ready to make itself constructively felt on Track III as well.

But this was not Wanandi's view. He did not have this progression in mind as an answer to the question why ASEAN should now shift its long-standing focus on the wishes of the state to the needs of society. He answered the "why now?" question not with reference to an *internal evolution* but by warranting that reorientation toward society as a necessary response to something very different: an *external shock*—the shock of globalization.

Wanandi acknowledged the Association's previous gains: elite-level acquaintance, politico-economic consolidation, beneficial trade, and expanded membership. But he did not argue that these mainly intra-regional gains had created new opportunities for

² The population figure aggregates national data for ASEAN's members as of July 2007 in Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>.

ASEAN. No, it was from the turbulent world *outside* Southeast Asia that both of the organization's new challenges—"the greatest challenges of its 40 years of existence"—had arrived: multifaceted globalization and strategic risk (p. 278).

My purpose in citing Wanandi's clear preference for an external rationale is not to disagree with him by inferring the need for a more "people-oriented" ASEAN from its own endogenous evolution. Believing in teleological democracy as the necessary fate of every nation is a characteristically—and parochially—American temptation that I am happy to resist. It is of interest, nevertheless, that he should have found ASEAN's two main challenges to be foreign in origin.

Outside or Inside—or Both?

Repeatedly in the 20th century the region that ASEAN would eventually span was called "the Balkans of Asia." The metaphor conjured an image of outsiders meddling in a deeply riven region's affairs. Just as the quarreling nationalities of southeastern Europe had been unable to determine their own future, so would outsiders determine the future of divided Southeast Asia.

Partly because of ASEAN's success, this trope is now obsolete. Buoyed by economic growth, the region's leaders have gained confidence in their ability to shape their own fate.

Yes, Southeast Asian societies are under external pressure from sources they cannot control, including those featured by Wanandi: technologically sped forces of globalization and potentially threatening imbalances of power between major outside actors. Yet as the history of the region has become more autonomous—more driven by Southeast Asians themselves—ASEAN's challenges have become more home-grown. Poverty in the region is not a consequence of globalization or a changing balance of external power. It results mainly from indigenous conditions, including what local authorities have or have not done. The same could be said of corruption. Outbreaks of ethnoreligious violence in parts of Indonesia and in the southern—Muslim—areas of Thailand and the Philippines may be clandestinely linked to outside networks. But these phenomena arise nevertheless from domestic conditions and grievances, including mistreatment by national and local authorities.

One could therefore, *pace* Wanandi, advocate changing ASEAN into a "people-oriented" body by pointing to an agenda of challenges originating inside the region. In making his case for re-orienting ASEAN from the state toward society, one could highlight the challenges posed by the problems that Southeast Asian states have themselves created for their people.

The state-society distinction itself bears scrutiny. It would be wrong to exaggerate the difference between state and society. Orienting ASEAN toward the one or the other is not an either-or choice. Only a rigid dichotomist could seriously deny to ASEAN the ability simultaneously to engage states *and* societies. As if Southeast Asians (outside Singapore) could not walk and chew gum at the same time! But it would also be naïve to

believe that society-centered and state-centered regionalisms are *necessarily* symbiotic, or even *necessarily* compatible.

An ASEAN that runs on both Tracks I and III certainly is imaginable. But it could be schizophrenic. ASEAN's personnel, money, time, and expertise are and will remain limited. Should such a dual-Track body concentrate scarce resources on ensuring the success of projects whose participants and direct beneficiaries are member-government officials? Should it invest those resources in the success of projects that directly serve and involve citizens and NGOs? Or should a state-*and*-society-oriented ASEAN split its wherewithal evenly between the two activities, and risk suboptimal outcomes on both Tracks at once?

I can see why Wanandi wanted to strengthen ASEAN by giving it more resources that would equip it to do more things at once. But of course the scarcity of ASEAN's assets will never be fully overcome. Doing one thing will always, in some sense, mean not doing something else. Wanandi himself was not so naïve as to believe that regionalism could become a frictionless game. Note the zero-sum tone of his recommendation that its new charter should "make ASEAN more people-oriented" so that it could "*move away* from being state-centric, as is largely the case at the moment" (p. 278; italics mine).

Wanandi also urged ASEAN to hold fewer meetings, implying that it should talk less and do more. To which I would add this: If the Association, in the course of moving away from the state toward society, should also move from talking to doing, the trade-offs between service to the state as opposed to society could become all the more acute. A talk shop can say many more things in rhetoric than a workshop can actually produce in reality.

Aside from there being but twenty-four hours in a day, there is a basic substantive difference between state security and human security. A given state may enjoy security from invasion or overthrow. But that condition need not mean that individual members of the corresponding society are themselves secure—physically, economically, politically, or culturally. It is rare for society to overwhelm the state. But in the name of state security, ruling elites commonly and sometimes directly and brutally cause human insecurity. Revolution is uncommon, but repression is not—including in Southeast Asia. Insecurity also results, of course, from the clashing of rival groups inside the state or within society.

This is the complex but realistic context in which Wanandi identified ASEAN's key challenges as external, namely, multifaceted globalization and strategic risk.

Meeting Two Challenges

First, he wrote, "ASEAN must be able to respond effectively to globalization and its dramatic impact on the economic, political life and even values of ASEAN members" (p. 278). Second, ASEAN must respond to "the new threat posed by international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, plus the new strategic developments and balance [of power] in East Asia," notably "the dramatic rise of China, and possibly soon also of India" (p. 278).

What is striking about this pair of challenges to ASEAN is not only their foreign provenance. In Wanandi's essay, they received unequal treatment. He mentioned the second challenge—strategic risk—but then left it aside. His essay featured the first challenge—multifaceted globalization. And because globalization affected societies dramatically, in economic, political, and even cultural—value—terms, it called for a “people-centered” ASEAN. Orienting the Association in that direction was the essay's main theme.

Wanandi could as easily have devoted his piece to the second or state-focused challenge of strategic risk. Such an essay might have recommended, for example, reducing such risk through enhanced military cooperation among ASEAN states to gather intelligence, counter terrorism, and prevent the changing strategic balance in Asia from endangering Southeast Asia. But such advice would have meant focusing the Association more on the state, and that priority would have collided with the priority on society that Wanandi wanted to stress.

His two challenges differ in another way as well. In his phrasing, whereas globalization had an “impact,” international terrorism, deadly weapons, and potential changes in the power balance constituted a “threat.” The implication was that changes in ASEAN's societies that globalization had stimulated, including value changes, were not all worth resisting. Some might be welcome. Later in the essay, Wanandi championed a charter that would be conducive to “democracy,” “fundamental freedoms,” and “respect for human rights” in Southeast Asia (p. 279). In this instance, far from urging ASEAN to resist a globalized threat, he was advising the Association to implement globalized norms.

The implication was that if globalization had begun to reorient Southeast Asians toward more liberal values, so should ASEAN, in reorienting itself toward its own population, promote those values. The global wave called democratization should not be blocked but surfed. In effect, Wanandi was asking the Association to respond to his two external challenges by helping member states to counter strategic risk while, at the same time, helping member societies to observe liberal values.

Because he did not develop the state-centered side of this argument, it is hard to know what its content might have been. Had he done so, however, he would have wanted to deal with the tension between these two recommendations—how the society-serving and the state-serving logics of response to the liberalizing element in globalization and to strategic risk, respectively, undermine one another.

Take Burma, as critics of its regime call that country—or Myanmar, the name bestowed by the regime itself. Under the first or society-serving priority, the junta in Burma should be treated as an enemy of a globally liberalizing norm. Under the second or state-focused alternative, the government in Myanmar should be treated as an ally against impending foreign threats. Other things being equal, pursuing the first logic makes it harder to implement the second—and vice versa.

ASEAN can try to make headway on both of these fronts at once. Compared with splitting its resources evenly between two different goals in search of a double success, however, moving in opposite policy directions at the same time may be even more likely to incur a double failure.

Of course ASEAN can walk and chew gum at the same time. The feat is less easily sustained, however, if the gum contains poison that causes paralysis. In the light of Wanandi's two challenges, how should ASEAN deal with Burma alias Myanmar? Is there a policy that the Association could adopt toward its most controversial member that could play the walk-*and*-chew purpose of the medicinal gum that Singapore does allow?

No such win-win move comes readily to mind. Could ASEAN help strengthen Myanmar against the strategic primacy of China, and thereby gain leverage to be used in persuading the junta to liberalize? Not if the generals see closer ties with China as a remedy for Burma's isolation by the West. If there is no consensus among ASEAN's members as to the goodness of democracy, neither do they all define strategic risk the same way.

Toward a People-oriented ASEAN?

Much of what Wanandi means by "people-oriented" is captured in his advocacy of a charter for ASEAN that enlists the Association in efforts to democratize and liberalize its region. Such a charter should "help to develop and consolidate democracy and the rule of law with respect for rights and fundamental freedoms" in Southeast Asia. ASEAN should adhere to the rule that changes of government should be "constitutional and democratic" (p. 279). "To make ASEAN more people-oriented, an ASEAN Consultative Assembly, consisting of members of parliaments and representatives of civil society, could provide advice, feedback and oversight" (p. 280). "ASEAN should also have an ASEAN Court of Justice, comprising designated judges nominated by each member state," although the right of recourse to other judicial venues, including the International Court of Justice, "should be maintained" (p. 279).

Three branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial? Is this a blueprint for ASEAN to become a democratic superstate? Probably not, although such an outcome is consonant with Wanandi's advice.

If his reforms were enacted, just how "people-oriented" would such a democratized ASEAN be? If a popular orientation implies lessening the distance between rulers and ruled, can this be accomplished by a proliferation of *regional*-level organs? An enlarged regional bureaucracy, however well meant, could make ASEAN less people-centered and more centered on itself. Nor does it follow that the stronger the Association becomes, the greater its legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Southeast Asians. How appreciative do Europeans feel toward "their" offices in Brussels? Would Southeast Asians feel any more empathy toward a more active and better equipped ASEAN's headquarters in Jakarta?

But this is not the standard argument against adding democratization to ASEAN's agenda. That conventional view is that doing so would transgress the Association's long-

standing and cardinal principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its sovereign member states.

This argument is, unfortunately, more often heard than explained. For one thing, what constitutes non-interference is not a constant but a variable—and is malleable to boot. Does “interference” adequately capture what happened when behind-the-scenes conversations between certain ASEAN actors and the rulers of Burma or Myanmar induced the latter “voluntarily” to decline the alphabetically scheduled opportunity to chair ASEAN’s Standing Committee in 2006?³ It does not. Interference depends not only on what A says or does to B, after all, but also on the relationship between A and B.

The junta in Myanmar has benefited from joining ASEAN more than ASEAN has from embracing the junta. Burma’s generals calculated that it would be wiser, on balance, to relinquish the rotating chair than to insist on occupying it. They may have done so knowing that hosting major ASEAN meetings inside Myanmar could have exposed them to unwanted coverage by foreign journalists, especially if local activists for democracy chose to protest and were arrested and abused while such meetings were going on. What mattered in the end was not sovereignty but interest.

Blatant interference versus strict abstention is a false dichotomy. In pregnancy, you are or you aren’t. In diplomacy, which prizes constructive ambiguity, it is quite possible—and often constructive—to “interfere” and yet “not interfere” at the same time. What else is a nudge between ostensible friends?

Democratization in Southeast Asia

Initiating or improving democracy in the countries that belong to ASEAN is one thing. Democratizing ASEAN itself is quite another. No necessary causal link runs from the latter to the former prospect. To the extent that democracy confers autonomy and equality upon participating actors, the democratization of ASEAN would reinforce the status quo—whatever regimes already existed in its member states. And if one agrees with Freedom House’s classification of six ASEAN states as “not free,” only three as “partly free,” and merely one—Indonesia—as “free” in 2006,⁴ the net effect of such a democratization of ASEAN would not be to vitiate but rather to entrench autocracy in Southeast Asia.

Clearly this is not Wanandi’s intent. But should it become feasible someday to implement the democratization of ASEAN in Wanandi’s sense, by innovating a regional regime that is oriented toward and somehow accountable to the broad and diverse mass of Southeast Asia’s population, it would seem wise to bear in mind the possible tensions between a “horizontal” democracy of equally sovereign states on the one hand, and a set of national democracies “vertically” rooted in individual freedoms and rights on the other.⁵

³ ASEAN calls Burma Myanmar. In alphabetic order in English, the chair passed in 2006 from Malaysia (skipping Myanmar) to the Philippines and, in 2007, to Singapore.

⁴ Arch Puddington, “The Freedom House Survey: The Pushback against Democracy,” *Journal of Democracy*, 18: 2 (April 2007), pp. 128-129.

⁵ I have pursued this distinction in “Democratizing ASEAN? A Topological View,” a paper written for a

An interesting parallel might be drawn here between indirect and direct rule during the colonial era in Southeast Asia. Indirect rule through sovereign-state members may be considerably less “people-centered” than direct rule that bypasses those autonomous states. But if direct rule is more democratic, it is also surely less realistic, because of the virtual certainty that most member states will object to it.

In any event, there is no real evidence yet that ASEAN is committed to democracy on consummatory grounds—as an end in itself. ASEAN’s interest in liberalization remains almost wholly instrumental.

In his essay, Wanandi implicitly acknowledged these differing conceptions: democracy for its own sake, and democracy for the sake of something else. When he wrote that ASEAN’s new charter should encourage “democracy,” “the rule of law,” and “respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms” (p. 279), he did not justify these conditions instrumentally as means to security, prosperity, or some other higher-priority goal. The omission allowed his readers to believe that he considered democracy and its accompaniments to be desirable in their own right.

But when it came to possibly abridging ASEAN’s long-standing principle of “non-interference” to foster democracy-for-its-own-sake, Wanandi had this to say: “While respecting the sovereignty of its members and the principle of non-interference in internal affairs of states, it needs to be recognized that there is a need for consultation and cooperation on domestic matters *that can seriously affect the security and well-being of other member-states*” (p. 279; italics mine).

Now if political liberalization is in and of itself a good thing, it should be promoted for itself and not as a means to something else, including security and well-being. From this basically ethical rather than practical standpoint, ASEAN should encourage democracy inside its Burmese member not because a less repressive Myanmar will alleviate the embarrassment that the Association’s diplomats might feel when meeting their Western counterparts, but because freedom is good and repression is bad.

By this absolute logic, the case for democracy is trivialized and made insincere if one’s only motive in promoting it is to relieve one’s own discomfort. Mere chagrin at the company one is accused of keeping does not meet Wanandi’s threshold. The awkwardness involved in co-membership with a brutal regime does not seriously affect either the security or the well-being of the other nine ASEAN states.

According to this instrumental view of democracy, if Western governments were not offended by the junta’s abuses, and if those abuses did not otherwise hurt the security and well-being of other ASEAN members, the problem of Burma would, in the eyes of the Association, cease to exist. Whereupon the Association could go on blithely tolerating and ignoring whatever predatory acts against their own people Myanmar’s ruling

generals might wish to commit. In such a blatantly “state-oriented”—some would say unconscionable—ASEAN, “people-oriented” idealism would have no place.

Wanandi’s criterion—actual damage to regional security and well-being—ruled out improved public relations with Burma’s critics as a valid reason for ASEAN to encourage democracy inside that country.⁶ At the same time his argument raises questions not covered by the scope he chose for his 2006 op ed: Does the lack of democracy in Myanmar seriously hurt other states in ASEAN, or not—and in what specific ways? Is the border with Thailand insecure enough to meet the threshold? Is Thailand sufficiently burdened with refugees from the regime? Is the illegal trade in methamphetamines injurious enough to the well-being—health—of Southeast Asians beyond Burma to satisfy Wanandi’s requirement, and thus justify action by ASEAN in support of democratizing its miscreant member? If Myanmar were democratized, would these irritants necessarily disappear? Why, or why not?

I have not researched the answers to these questions. But I doubt that Wanandi’s criteria have (yet?) been met.⁷ That hypothesis would at least help to explain why, in September 2007, when peaceful protesters linked to the “88 Generation” were being arrested in large numbers in cities and town around Myanmar, ASEAN itself, as a Track I body representing its region, made no official comment—at least none that I could find on the organization’s website.

It is possible that Wanandi’s threshold—a serious effect on regional security and well-being—will never be reached. His formulation of the instrumental case for democracy may forever remain a dead letter. One can in theory imagine that Western governments could themselves become willing to punish ASEAN, for its guilt by association with Burma, in ways that would seriously affect the security and well-being of the organization’s members. But in 2007, especially in the wake of second thoughts in the West about democracy promotion in the disastrous wake of the Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq, that was an utterly chimerical hope.

Perhaps the least implausible prediction one could make regarding Burma’s political future is that, notwithstanding the external character of Wanandi’s challenges to the region, if Myanmar does undergo political change it will happen for reasons and through actions internal to that troubled country.

A Bridgeable Contradiction

⁶ See, however, Wanandi, “Myanmar: Difficult Road to Reconciliation and Democracy,” in *Global, Regional and National*, p. 244.

⁷ In a *Jakarta Post* op ed published on 23 July 2004 Wanandi wrote that the failure of Myanmar’s leaders to live up to their promises of progress toward democracy had “seriously endangered ASEAN’s credibility in the international community.” But had this endangerment of credibility also seriously affected Southeast Asia’s security and well-being? It had not. Nevertheless, based on this threat to credibility, Wanandi urged ASEAN to cooperate with “the international community” in order “to get Myanmar moving in the right direction.” The adjective “right” in this context may have been intended normatively (democracy is good whatever its uses), empirically (democracy is useful in preserving credibility), or in both meanings at once. Wanandi, “Indonesian Leadership Vital as ASEAN Looks to Future,” *Regional, Global and National*, p. 422.

Fortunately, just as the choice of being a “people-oriented” or a “state-oriented” Association is not an on-off switch, neither is the distinction between pragmatism and idealism an unbridgeable contradiction.

There is no reason why one cannot support democratization on both practical and principled grounds. Politicians do it all the time. So do analysts.

So did Wanandi in the collection of op eds from which I drew the essay that has been my intellectual springboard here. Among these op eds there are passages that offer or imply practical rationales for democracy as a means to some other end: e.g., pp. 244, 377, 422, and 425. Other texts suggest principled support for democracy as an end in itself: e.g., p. 319, 334, 390-391, 413, 423, and 434. Still other passages convey both of these understandings: e.g., pp. 318 and 414.

And why not? If democracy is not just an absolute good, but efficacious to boot, that is all the more reason to promote it.

The eclecticism of Wanandi’s reasoning also makes tactical sense: Compared with its instrumental counterpart, the consummatory case for democracy has far fewer adherents in the circles—elite circles—that matter in Southeast Asia. He wished to appeal to those circles, including persuading them to help make ASEAN more “people-oriented.” Hence he spoke in both terms: idealism and altruism for the already converted, realism and self-interest for the still unconvinced.

Over the next four decades of ASEAN’s life, if it lives that long, what will happen?

Will the securitization of democracy—an instance of selling a principle for its practical use—achieve what ethical preaching to the choir could not? Or will the process of couching a good thing in utilitarian terms raise expectations and entail compromises that will prove demeaning to the thing itself? Will ASEAN’s reformers wait and hope for the globalization of liberal norms to enlarge the size of the choir—the proportion of Southeast Asians who believe in democracy for its own sake? Or will they inspire the Association proactively to help that process along? Or will the consummatory and the instrumental arguments for liberalization both crumble when democracy fails to deliver the security and welfare that people in the region will want even more than they want freedom?

In this complex and ambiguous context, it is hard to know whether ASEAN ought to play Marx and wait for history to improve, or imitate Lenin by trying to lead history forward.

However these questions are answered, it seems to me safest to conclude that events on the ground, more than words in a charter, will determine the future of democracy in Southeast Asia. But that need not disappoint the Association’s leaders and well-wishers. ASEAN can still make a difference, and in many different ways.

It follows from this that a rich and fascinating range of choices for ASEAN remain to be explored—by officials, scholars, and public intellectuals thinking and writing in the genre

of “ASEANalysis” that, in research institutes around the region, Jusuf Wanandi and his colleagues pioneered.

[18 Sep 07]